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BRIEF THIRD EDITION

BY THE PEOPLE

DEBATING AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

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Ideas That Shape American Politics

ARMY CAPTAIN RUSSELL BURGOS hunkered down in his bunker as mortars ripped through the night. A year ago he had been a political science professor; now he was fighting in Iraq. Burgos's unit was operating in the Sunni Triangle, where the fighting was fiercest. "A mortar attack in the middle of the night," he mused, "is an odd place to reconsider a course syllabus." But that is exactly what he found himself doing. Experiencing war made him see politics and societies in new ways.

As shells fell on the American base, Burgos thought about something that his classes had been missing: the study of ideas. The United States entered the war because of what key decision makers believed. All around him, men and women were fighting and dying over ideas—ideas such as freedom, democracy, equality, power, and faith in God.

Strangely enough, Burgos wrote later, ideas had barely come up in his own political science classes. Yet ideas helped explain why the United States launched the war, how it fought the war, and how it explained the war to both friends and enemies.[1]

Who are we? Our ideas tell us—and they tell the world. The United States is a nation built on ideas. You will see ideas at work in every chapter of this book, for they touch every feature of government and politics. They affect the way Americans define their national ideals, their political goals, and their nation itself. As you read about these ideas—and as you continue through this book—think about other important ideas that should be added to the list alongside the seven we discuss in this chapter. If you come up with a compelling example, we may quote you in the next edition.

In this chapter, you will:

- Learn about four key questions.
- Learn about the seven key American ideas: liberty, self-rule, limited government, individualism, the American dream, equality, and faith in God.
- Explore the essential question: How do ideas affect politics?

Army Captain Russell Burgos hands out supplies to Iraqi children in 2004.

The Spirit of American Politics

We address four questions throughout this book to help make sense of American politics and government. By the time you finish reading, you will understand the debates sparked by each question—and you will be able to participate knowledgeably yourself.

Who Governs?

As Benjamin Franklin left the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a woman stopped him. "What kind of government have you given us?" she asked. According to legend, the wise old Franklin responded, "A republic, madam—if you can keep it." The United States organized itself around a ringing declaration of popular rule: Governments derive "their just power from the consent of the governed." In a **republic**, the people are in charge. Franklin knew, however, that popular governments are extremely difficult to "keep." All previous republics—such as Athens, Rome, and Florence—had collapsed. His point was that the people must be vigilant and active if they are to maintain control.

Republic: A government in which citizens rule indirectly and make government decisions through their elected representatives.

Who governs? Do the people rule? Some of us would answer "yes—and today more than ever." After all, candidates like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders defied party leaders in the 2016 election and each went a long way. Others are not so sure. What if the people are not in charge—then who is?

Over the years, political scientists have developed theories to answer the question of where the power really lies in American politics. Four theories are especially important:

- *Pluralism* suggests that people can influence government through the many interest groups that spring up to champion everything from fighting global warming to banning abortions. Pluralists suggest that interest groups give most people a voice. Competing and bargaining, interest groups are a prime mover in many government decisions.
- *Elite theory* counters that power actually rests in the hands of a small number of wealthy and powerful individuals—especially corporate executives and top government officials. The Tea Party, Black Lives Matter, and many other movements all have charged that elites were not sharing power with common people.
- *Bureaucratic theory* argues that the real control lies with the millions of men and women who carry out the day-to-day operations of modern government. Here the power of most Americans to weigh in on policy-making is sidelined, as bureaucratic experts establish policy regardless of elections and interest groups.
- *Social movement theory* emphasizes the power citizens can wield when they organize and rise up in protest—regardless of who is in control of day-to-day politics.

BY THE NUMBERS

American Ideas

Rank of Americans in self-reported happiness compared to citizens of more than 100 other nations, according to the latest World Happiness Project: **15**
Rank of Swiss, Mexicans, and Afghans, respectively: **1, 14, 153**

Number of times the word *rights* appears in the Declaration of Independence: **10**
Number of times the word *rights* appears in the original Constitution: **0**
Number of times the word *rights* appears in amendments to the Constitution: **15**

Percentage of Americans who say the gap between the rich and everyone else has increased in the last 10 years: **65**
Percentage of Italians, Poles, and Americans, respectively, who agree that "it is the role of the government to take care of people who cannot care for themselves": **66, 56, 23**
Percentage of Americans who say that religion is "very important" to them: **50**
Percentage of Spaniards, British, and French who say the same: **22, 17, 13**
Percentage of Americans who agreed that "most people who work hard will get ahead" in 2000: **74**
Percentage of Americans who agreed in 2016: **62**
Percentage of 18–29 year-olds agreeing "The American dream is dead," 2016: **48**

These theories represent very different answers to the vital question: Who rules in America? Have we remained a republic, governed by the people? We will often return to this question—and ask you to consider which of these theories best describes power in the United States today. (And, yes, you'll be able to mix, match, and create your own.) However, to answer a question like who is in charge you have to know how the political system actually works.

How Does American Politics Work?

Consider a classic definition of politics: *who gets what, when, and how.*[2] Every society has limited amounts of desirable goods such as money, prestige, and power. Politics helps determine how those resources are distributed—to which people, in what amounts, under which rules. A second definition is even simpler: Politics is how a society makes its collective decisions. Every nation has its own way of deciding. This book explains how collective decisions are made in the United States. The key to understanding our political decision making lies in four "Is": ideas, interests, individuals, and institutions such as Congress, the Supreme Court, and the media.

The U.S. Capitol, Washington, DC. Tourists see an impressive monument to democracy. Political scientists see an institution with complicated rules that give advantage to some individuals and groups.

Ideas. Powerful ideas shape American politics. As you will see later in this chapter, we stress seven essential ideas: liberty, democracy (or self-rule), individualism, limited government, the American dream, equality, and faith in God. At first glance, they may all look simple; as you will quickly learn, however, each has at least two very different sides. Each idea provokes long, loud controversies about what values and policies Americans should pursue.

Institutions. When most people talk about politics, they think about individuals: President Donald Trump, senators such as Marco Rubio (R-FL), governors like Jerry Brown (D-CA) and Nikki Haley (R-SC), or commentators such as Rush Limbaugh and Rachel Maddow. Political scientists, on the other hand, stress **institutions**—*the organizations, norms, and rules that structure political action*. Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Department of Homeland Security are all institutions.

Institutions: The organizations, norms, and rules that structure government and public action.

Think about how institutions influence your own behavior. You may compete in a classroom by making arguments. If the debate gets heated and you shove someone, however, you are in trouble. But if you play basketball after class, things are quite the opposite. There, a little shoving is fine, but no one wants to play hoops with someone who is always arguing. Different institutions—the classroom, the gym—have different rules, and most people adopt them without a second thought. Note how the different institutional rules give some people advantages over others. Smart students who think quickly have an advantage in one institution (the classroom), while fast, athletic students have an advantage in another (the gym). Political institutions work in the same way. The U.S. Senate, the Chicago City Council, the Nevada legislature, the state courts in Florida, the governor's office in Wisconsin, the Marine Corps, the Department of Agriculture, and thousands of other institutions all have their own rules and procedures. Each institution organizes behavior. Each gives an advantage to some interests over others. By the time you finish this book, you will know to ask the same question every time you encounter a political issue. Which institutions are involved, and how do they influence politics?

Rational-choice theory: An approach to political behavior that views individuals as rational, decisive actors who know their political interests and seek to act on them.

Interests. For many social scientists, interests are the center of the story. Political action often flows from individuals, groups, and nations pursuing their own self-interest. In the chapters that follow, we explore three types of interests: we examine whether rational self-interest motivates people's political actions and opinions (known as **rational-choice theory**); we trace the political

influence of interests and groups; and we consider the ideal of a public interest shared by everyone in society.

Individuals. Finally, individuals influence political outcomes. This book puts special emphasis on how ordinary people change their world. Our hope is simple: We want to inspire you, our reader, to get involved.

What Does Government Do?

Back in 1787, the Constitution's creators stated the basic goals of the new government: "Establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty." Their list remains remarkably accurate, even as the size of our government has expanded dramatically.

Americans have a very active civil society. People come together voluntarily to achieve a goal through groups, such as a Bible study circle, a group of recycling volunteers, a business association, or a student government. In the abstract, at least, Americans prefer voluntary groups to government action. Polls consistently reflect public disapproval for all aspects of government: bureaucrats, the mainstream media, lobbyists, and Congress. Today, only about 24 percent of Americans trust the national government "to do the right thing most of the time."[3]

You can get a good idea of the federal government's priorities by looking at its major budget categories. Figure 1.1 shows you how the federal government spends its $4.1 trillion annual budget. Many people are surprised when they examine the federal budget for the first time. More than 61 percent of all federal government spending goes to just four programs: the military, Social Security (which provides a steady income for people over the age of sixty-five, as well as for people with disabilities and other groups), Medicare (which provides healthcare for people over sixty-five), and Medicaid (which provides healthcare for some poor people; about half of Medicaid spending also goes to people over sixty-five). America's national government devotes most of its resources to the military and to seniors.

All four of these big-ticket items are immensely popular programs. Although every politician is for smaller government, very few have the courage to take on any of these four programs—no matter how much they cost. In short, Americans dislike government in the abstract. However, by and large, they support many of the things that government actually does.

The government sets the rules for society. Drive on the right side of the street. Stop at red lights. No tobacco for children. No rat hairs or bug parts in restaurant food. No discrimination

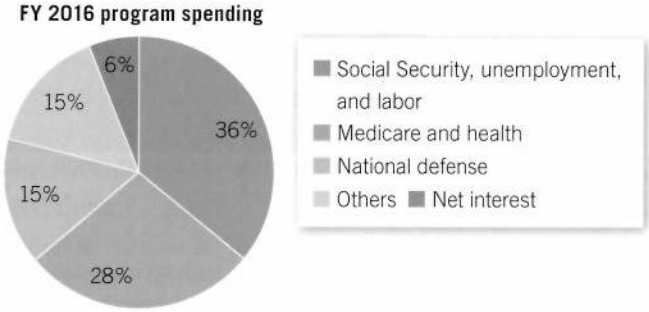


FIGURE 1.1 *The U.S. federal budget. (Christopher Chantrill)*

against women when hiring. Sometimes the rules make sense to most people; other times they trigger fierce debates. In either case, governments affect what we do almost every minute of every day. As you read this book, think about what government should do, what it should stay out of, and why.

Who Are We?

In a rapidly changing, diverse, immigrant nation, this may be the deepest question of all. The United States is a nation of immigrants, a country where individuals come to reinvent themselves. The nation is always changing—the latest shift sees people who consider themselves the majority (Caucasians) becoming a minority of the population in the next thirty years (see Figure 1.2). American politics constantly addresses the most fundamental question about a people: Who are we?

We begin every chapter of this book by showing how the topics in the chapter help explain who we are. All the features of American politics—foundational ideas, the Constitution, presidents, justices, media personalities, bureaucrats, interest groups, and more—are part of the struggle to define and redefine the nation.

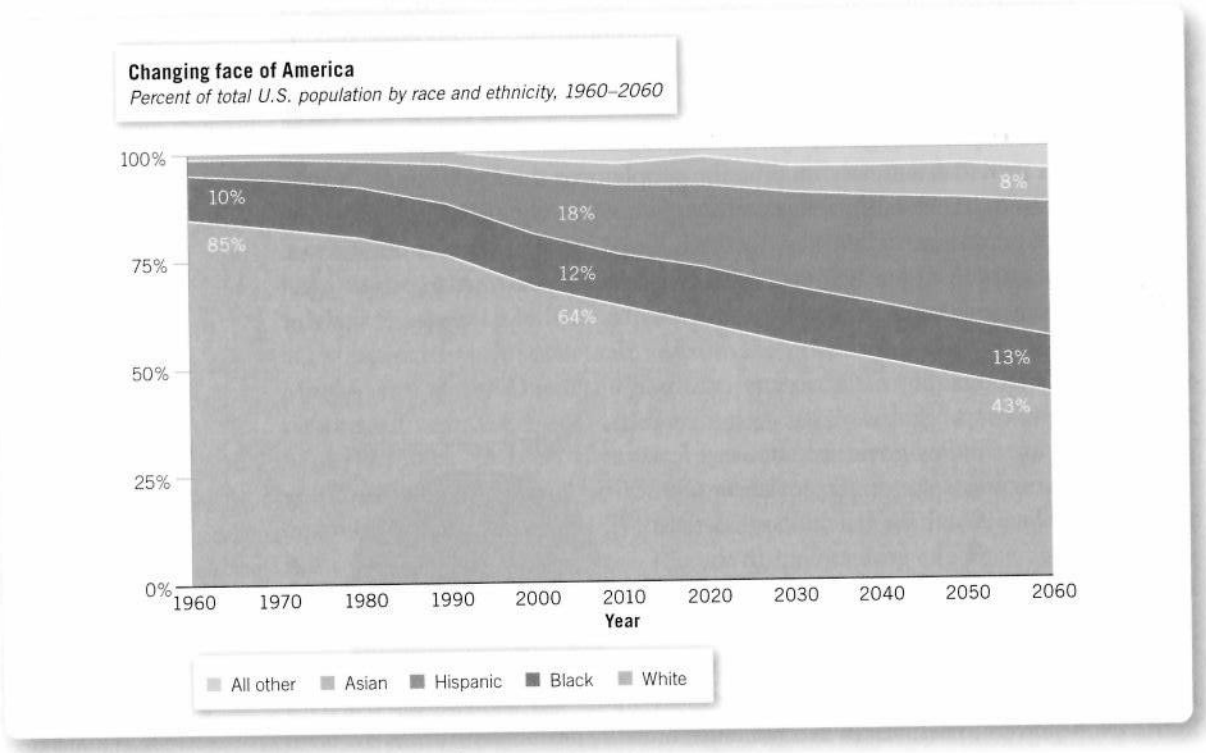


FIGURE 1.2 *Race and ethnicity in America—yesterday, today, and tomorrow. (U.S. Census Bureau)*

The most important answer to that question is *you*. If you are part of the so-called "millennial" generation, defined as including those aged 16–34, you are the future of American politics. To us, that is a comforting thought. Studies of the millennial generation (or Generation Y) show that you are, on average, more responsible, harder-working, and more law-abiding than the generations that came before (including ours). You tend to volunteer more, donate a higher share of your income to charity, and start more entrepreneurial organizations with social impact. You might just be the generation that finally redeems the endless American quest for racial harmony and gender equality. You are also a generation at home in a rapidly changing and diverse world.

We do have one concern, however. Compared to previous generations, millennials are less interested in politics, public service, or even news events. Will this generation take up the challenge of "keeping up the republic"? If a whole generation is reluctant to get involved, American democracy will suffer.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- » We explore American government by asking four questions: Who governs? How does American politics work? What does government do? And who are we?
- » In a republic, power rests with the people. However, this is a difficult form of government to maintain.
- » American political decisions are shaped by four "I" factors: ideas, institutions, interests, and individuals.
- » Americans tend to dislike their national government—but like the benefits that government programs provide.
- » Because the nation is so diverse—and so rapidly changing—the answer to the question of who we are is constantly being rewritten.
- » Every feature of American politics influences this constant debate over defining the nation and its people.

A Nation of Ideas

As the colonies broke away from England, on July 4, 1776, American leaders issued a Declaration of Independence explaining their revolutionary actions. Its second paragraph describes the idea that animated them:

> *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*

Most of us have heard that line so often that it has lost its force, but it is one of the most powerful ideas in history. It explains the role of government—securing each individual's rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Declaration states that this is why people form governments—"*to secure those rights.*" And, although the men and women who fought the revolution would fall far short of this ideal, they left the nation an inspiring goal. Every American generation argues about how it can best achieve the Declaration's shimmering promise to "secure" the rights of every citizen.

American exceptionalism: The view that the United States is uniquely characterized by a distinct set of ideas such as equality, self-rule, and limited government.

Many people, including some political scientists, often describe the United States as a unique nation, different from every other. That view is known as **American exceptionalism**. Of course, every nation is distinctive in some way. The United States is exceptional, in large part, because of seven key ideas that guide our politics. Most of them can be traced back to the Declaration of Independence.

What are the seven big ideas? Liberty, self-rule (which is often called democracy), limited government, individualism, the American dream, equality, and faith in God. These ideas touch almost everything we do as a nation. They are the foundation of American politics and lie at the core of what makes America distinctive.

There is an unusual twist to these ideas. Americans rarely agree on what they mean. Instead, we constantly debate them. All our foundational ideas have (at least) two sides and spark ardent disputes. To reveal the real truth about American politics, we should post signs at all the airports that say: "*Welcome to the great argument that is the USA.*"

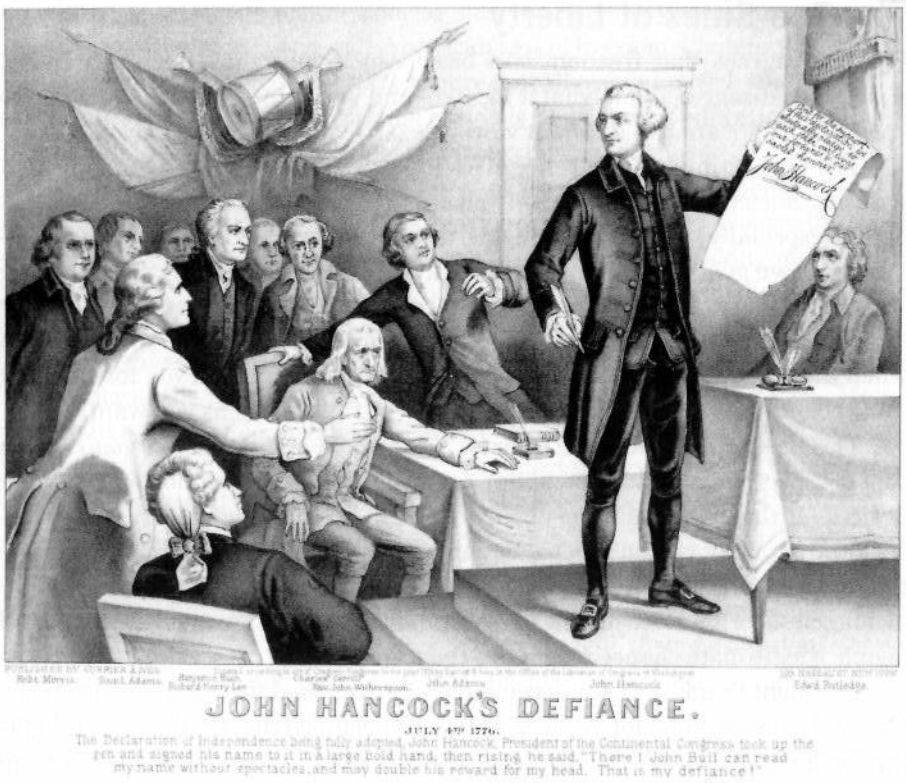
Now let's consider the first key idea.

Liberty

As the Revolutionary War broke out, the royal governor of Virginia promised freedom to any slave who joined the British. Eighty thousand slaves ran for the British lines. Some of them fought in black units, with their motto—"liberty for the slaves"—sewn onto their uniforms.[4]

The enslaved men and women who fought for the British saw their hopes dashed when their side surrendered at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781—effectively ending the Revolutionary War. After the battle, the Redcoats, as the English soldiers were known, began to withdraw, rowing out to the warships bobbing in the harbor for their long retreat. One desperate group of slaves raced past the sentries on the wharf, dove into the sea, and swam toward the long rowboats that were ferrying the defeated British troops out to their naval vessels.

As the black men tried to clamber aboard the small boats, British troops pushed them away. Fearful that the swimmers would swamp the craft, the troops pulled out axes and hacked off the slaves' hands and fingers. And *still*



● *Ideas have consequences. John Hancock of Massachusetts defiantly signs the Declaration. According to legend, he signed it in big, bold letters so King George could read Hancock's name without his spectacles—and "double the reward for my head."*

they kept coming, trying to surge aboard, thrashing after their fading dream of liberty. The image is unforgettable: These men were so desperate for freedom that even as the Redcoats swung their bloody hatchets, they kept clutching for the boats that might carry them away from bondage.

"The Land of the Free"

No idea comes up more often in American history than freedom or liberty (we use the words interchangeably in this book). The national anthem declares America "the land of the free." During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, high school students spilled out of Baptist churches and marched toward dogs and high-pressure fire hoses, singing, "Everyone shout freedom, freedom, freedom!" The Statue of Liberty is inscribed "Give me . . . your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." President George W. Bush declared in his second inaugural address, "The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world." A group of conservative Republicans in Congress established the Freedom Caucus in 2015.

What is **freedom**? *It means that the government will protect your life, your liberty, and your property from the coercion of others (including public officials) in order to permit you to pursue the goals you define for yourself.*

Freedom: The ability to pursue one's own desires without interference from others.

The Two Sides of Liberty

Everyone agrees that freedom is a basic American value. But, in practice, Americans disagree about what it means—and what governments should do to ensure it. There are two different views: negative liberty and positive liberty.[5]

Negative liberty: Freedom from constraints or the interference of others.

The more familiar view is **negative liberty**: *freedom is the absence of constraints.* Society's responsibility, from this perspective, is to make sure that others (especially government officials) do not interfere with individuals pursuing their own goals. Negative liberty firmly limits government from interfering with what you say, what you publish, and how you pray. Some conservatives take negative liberty further. They argue that public officials violate your freedom when they collect taxes from you to feed the hungry or punish you for smoking tobacco or marijuana. Negative freedom is the right to act as you want.

Positive liberty: The ability—and provision of basic necessities—to pursue one's goals.

The alternative is **positive liberty**: *the freedom to pursue one's goals.* From this perspective, individuals cannot really be free—they cannot pursue their desires—if they lack the basic necessities of life. Protecting liberty means ensuring that every citizen has education, food, shelter, healthcare, and educational opportunities. After all, how can people truly be free if they are hungry or homeless? This view justifies government action as a way to help give all people a legitimate chance to achieve their desires.

see for yourself 1.1

Go online to hear President Roosevelt deliver his speech on the Four Freedoms.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt forcefully expressed this view in 1941. As the United States prepared for World War II, he proclaimed that the nation was fighting for "four freedoms": freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The first two—freedom of speech and religion—were traditional negative liberties: no one could infringe on these individual rights. However, "freedom from want" was something new, a positive liberty that entails helping needy people who have fallen on hard times. Roosevelt was

What Do You Think? Negative Versus Positive Liberty

Americans often disagree about the meaning of "freedom." Is freedom the absence of constraints (negative liberty) or the freedom to pursue one's goals with equal opportunity (positive liberty)?

Do you believe in negative liberty? Government should not interfere with individuals. Freedom means leaving every person alone to do what he or she wishes—without interference.

Or do you believe in positive liberty? Freedom simply is not a meaningful concept if you or your family are chronically hungry. A decent society must lift everyone to a basic minimum. That's what living in a democracy should be about.

Do your beliefs fall somewhere in between? The truth is that few people would build a society around a pure form of negative or positive liberty. Think about how you might combine these two concepts. You may find it easier to answer this question after reading about the other major ideas. If you are not ready to choose, read on—and then return to this question.

suggesting that social welfare policies such as unemployment insurance and Social Security were part of the all-American idea of freedom. Contemporary ideas of positive freedom include efforts to ensure that all people are well educated or to stop them from smoking. The guiding notion is that a lack of education, or illness or addiction, makes it difficult for them to pursue their goals.

Which side is a more accurate view of freedom? That depends on your values. Beneath these two visions of liberty lie different approaches to the good society. The negative view emphasizes personal autonomy: Taxing me violates my freedom of property. Strong proponents of negative liberty are known as **libertarians** and oppose most forms of government action. Libertarians call for a small government that simply leaves people alone as long as they are not interfering in the rights of others. The positive view follows Roosevelt: Membership in a free society means sharing enough wealth so that everyone enjoys freedom from want. The two perspectives reflect different values, different visions of society, and different definitions of liberty.

Libertarians: People who believe in minimal government—specifically, that public officials' only role should be defending borders, prosecuting crime, and protecting private property.

The Idea of Freedom Is Always Changing

Once upon a time, Americans permitted slavery and racial segregation. Women lost all their legal rights the day they were married; their possessions—even their very bodies—passed into the custody of their husbands. Immigrants from China, and later from India, were denied any hope of becoming Americans no matter how long they lived in the country. The ideal of freedom moved Americans to reverse each of these prejudices.

Scholars disagree about how to interpret the results. Some see American history as a steady march toward greater liberty. Yes, they admit, American history is full of oppression. However, our faith in freedom leads oppressed groups to fight for their rights. Other political thinkers warn that the outcome in the fight is never inevitable. Instead, freedom is won and lost . . . and won and lost again. Americans fought their bloody civil war to end slavery, only to watch new forms of racial segregation and oppression take hold and last almost for another century. We should never take liberty for granted; indeed, fewer Americans are satisfied with the freedom they have today than they were just a few years ago (see Figure 1.3).[6]

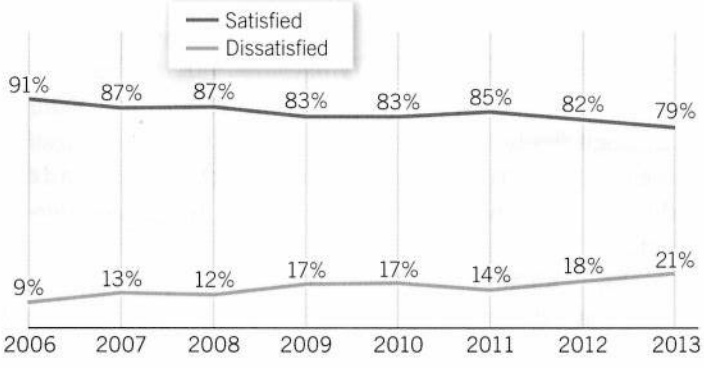


FIGURE 1.3 *Fewer Americans are satisfied with their freedom to choose what they want to do with their lives. Some conservatives blame too much government interfering with negative liberty; some liberals respond that cuts in government programs have undercut positive freedom. (Gallup)*

THE BOTTOM LINE

- Liberty—or the freedom to pursue your goals—is the most often invoked American value.
- There are two different views of what liberty means. *Negative liberty* emphasizes a lack of constraints on individuals, even if those constraints are intended to help others. *Positive liberty* calls on the community to help everyone satisfy their basic needs.
- Guarantees of individual liberty have developed over time. Some scholars see the rise of freedom as inevitable, reflecting American ideals; others see it as a constant battle that can always go either way.

Self-Rule

As the American Revolution began, mobs gathered in the towns and cities. The people, they declared, would seize authority from royal governors (appointed by the tyrannical king) and exercise power themselves. "The mob has begun to think for itself," lamented one wealthy New Yorker. "Poor reptiles, before noon they will bite" (meaning *revolt*).[7]

Patriotic crowds ignored the skeptics. At mass meetings, the people voted for laws, enforced decrees, and even issued wedding licenses. They dispatched boisterous pro-American toughs, who used sticks and stones to discourage individuals from participating in British institutions. Here is a powerful image of democracy: American people bypassing government officials and running the country themselves from the town commons. The people ruled.

Self-rule: The idea that legitimate government flows from the people.

That principle sounds simple. The United States is the world's longest running democracy—of course, the people rule. But from the beginning, a great debate arose about how to achieve **self-rule**. The Constitution was meant to settle the issue—but we are still arguing about its meaning, some 230 years later.

How do we achieve self-rule? Americans have long vacillated between two very different paths—a *democracy* and a *republic*.

One Side of Self-Rule: Democracy

Democracy: A goverment in which citizens rule directly and make government decisions for themselves.

Democracy involves citizen participation in making government decisions. Whether directly or through freely elected representatives, they exercise self-rule. (*Demos* is the Greek word for "the people" and *kratia* is the Greek word for "rule/power.") In early New England, citizens governed in town meetings—without relying on elected officials.

Thomas Jefferson, who drafted the Declaration of Independence and served as the third U.S. president, was the most vocal proponent of maximizing

democracy. "The will of the majority," wrote Jefferson, is a "sacred principle" and "the only sure guardian of the rights of man." If the people cannot govern themselves, asked Jefferson, how can they possibly be trusted with the government of others?[8]

The result is a rich American legacy of taking to the streets to demonstrate, rally, and protest. Examples include the "Occupy Wall Street" demonstrations against income inequality in many U.S. cities; Tea Party protests against too much government; Black Lives Matter rallies; and giant Earth Day demonstrations that launched the modern environmental movement. Thomas Jefferson's dream of direct democracy lives on. Idealists throughout American history have returned to the democrat's first principle: The people should exercise power as much as possible.

Students take to the streets of the capital to express their pro-life values.

Another Side of Self-Rule: A Republic

Most of the men who drafted the Constitution did not agree with Jefferson about democracy. The states had tried to create direct democracy right after the American Revolution. George Washington thought the result was chaos. "We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature," he grumbled. James Madison put it most famously: "Democracies have [always] been spectacles of turbulence and contention . . . as short in their lives as violent in their deaths." The problem, said Madison, was that in direct democracy, the majority often gets carried away. They push their self-interest without paying attention to the rights of the minority. Direct democracy, he concluded, offers no barrier to lynch mobs crying for blood.[9]

The alternative is a republic. In this form of government, the people rule indirectly through their elected representatives. The constitutional framers made an important contribution to the theory of self-rule. Classical democratic theory was wrong in expecting that popular government would only work if the people were virtuous. In fact the people are often not virtuous at all. "If men were angels," wrote James Madison in *Federalist* No. 51, "no government would be necessary." The great challenge, he argued, was to devise government institutions that would protect individual rights even if a majority of the people were selfish and corrupt.

A Mixed System

Which view of self-rule holds in the United States? Both do. We can say that the United States is a democratic republic because it includes elements of a

democracy *and* a republic. There are plenty of opportunities for direct participation. At the same time, American government is organized to check the majority. The House, the Senate, the president, and the Supreme Court all put the brakes on one another. And all of them face fifty different state governments, each with its own politics, powers, and programs. American government operates through elected and unelected officials who answer (sometimes indirectly) to the public.

The sheer number of elected officials—more than five hundred thousand—reveals our hybrid form of government. That's one elected government official for every six hundred people in the country. Few other nations come close to this ratio. We elect representatives, reflecting our origins as a republic, but the enormous number of opportunities to serve in elective office moves us closer to a democracy.

Although our government combines elements of both democracy and republic, the debate continues about which way we should tilt. Which stance do you prefer?

THE BOTTOM LINE

» Self-rule is a powerful and enduring idea guiding American government. Lincoln put it best: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people."

» There are two chief pathways to government by the people: a *democracy* and a *republic*. Americans have always sought to balance these two ideals.

Limited Government

Back in 1691, while America was still part of Great Britain, King William III appointed Benjamin Fletcher to be governor of New York and gave him control over the New England colonies (which had been independent until then). The Connecticut legislature did not want to cede its power to Governor Fletcher and immediately selected a new commander for the local militia—a direct challenge to the new governor's authority. Fletcher sailed to Hartford, the capital of Connecticut, with a small detachment of troops. He assembled the Connecticut militia and had an officer read the royal proclamation declaring his authority over the state—and its militia.

As the officer read aloud, the Connecticut militiamen began to beat their drums in defiance. Fletcher tried to restore order by commanding his soldiers to fire their muskets in the air. In response, the commander of the Connecticut militia stepped forward, put his hand on the hilt of his sword, and issued his own warning: "If my drummers are again interrupted, I'll make sunlight shine through you. We deny and defy your authority." Outnumbered and in no mood for bloodshed, Fletcher beat a quick retreat to his vessel and sailed ignominiously back to New York City. Because the king and his ministers

were more than three thousand miles away, they never heard about this little rebellion against their authority.[10]

The Origins of Limited Government

The tale of Governor Fletcher illustrates an enduring idea: Americans distrust centralized leadership and have consistently sought to limit its power. Eighty years before the Revolutionary War, Connecticut had grown used to electing its own leaders and going its own way. The people saw the king as a distant figure with no right to interfere in their affairs. The image of central government as a remote, unfeeling, untrustworthy authority that threatens our freedoms runs through American history (see Figure 1.4 and Table 1.1).

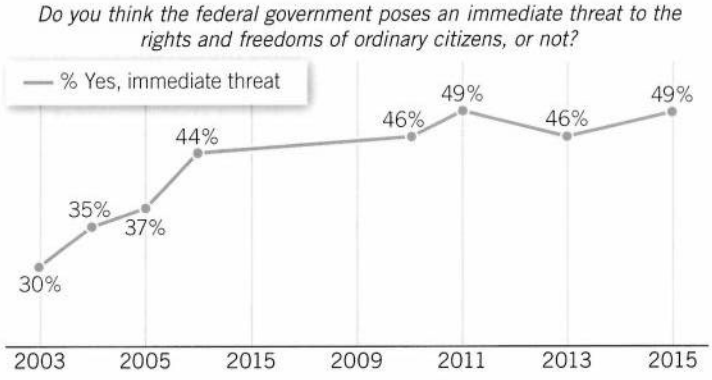


FIGURE 1.4 *A large minority of Americans express hostility to government—a tradition that goes back to the nation's origins. (Gallup)*

Why did Americans develop this distrust? The answer lies in how the people secured their rights in the first place. In most nations, the central government—made up of kings or aristocrats or both—grudgingly granted their people rights such as the vote or jury trials. Sometimes the people

TABLE 1.1 In What Ways Do You See the Government Posing an Immediate Threat to the Rights and Freedoms of Its Citizens?

	% MENTIONING
Too many laws/government too big in general	19
Violations of freedoms/civil liberties	15
Gun control	12
Too much involvement in people's private lives	10
Socialist government	6
Taking away freedom of speech	6
Taking away freedom of religion	6
Police/law enforcement violations/arrest	4
Government surveillance of citizens	4
Marriage issues	4

Source: Gallup

rebelled (as in France), sometimes they negotiated with kings (England), and sometimes monarchs expanded rights to modernize their nations (Thailand). All these countries share a common experience: Kings or the central governments that replaced them were the source of rights and liberties. No wonder citizens in these nations instinctively look to the government for help in solving their problems. The United States was dramatically different. Experience taught Americans to see the central government not as a potential source of rights, but as a threat to their life, liberty, and happiness.

And Yet . . . the United States Has a Big Government

Conservatives: Americans who believe in reduced government spending, personal responsibility, traditional moral values, and a strong national defense. Also known as *right* or *right-wing*.

Here is the paradox lying at the heart of the limited-government idea. People across the political spectrum demand government action. Many **conservatives** seek to use federal authority to crack down on drugs, root out obscenity, limit marriage to heterosexual couples, get tougher on crime, forbid abortions, grow the military, secure the borders, or enhance homeland security.

Liberals: Americans who value cultural diversity, government programs for the needy, public intervention in the economy, and individuals' right to a lifestyle based on their own social and moral positions. Also known as *left* or *left-wing*.

Most **liberals** reject the idea that public officials should interfere in people's private lives. But they are all for active government when it comes to economic policy or corporate regulation. They call on the government to sponsor fast trains, bank regulations, environmental protections, and school lunch programs (there's the freedom from want again).

Limits on Government Action

In short, Americans often say they do not like government and then demand government action for causes they care about. Their calls for action generally face two hurdles: the desire to limit government and the Constitution.

When the framers designed our political system, they organized suspicion of government right into the system. The federal Constitution includes an intricate system of checks and balances on power, which we will explore in the next chapter. The Constitution limits what Congress may do—and Americans vigorously debate exactly where those boundaries actually are.

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie comforts victims of Hurricane Sandy, a massive 2012 storm. During crises such as this one, even staunch critics of the government set their views aside to demand action.

Although it is difficult for government officials to undertake new tasks, the barriers are not insurmountable. During times of crisis, people turn to the government and demand action. Skilled leadership also can negotiate sweeping changes. And once programs go into effect, they often prove popular.

It is ironic that the limits on change make it difficult to repeal new programs once they make it past all the hurdles and are up and running. For example, Social Security was passed in 1935 during the economic crisis of the Great Depression; Medicare passed in part because of a great electoral landslide in 1964. Both are now extremely popular policies; in fact, they are so popular that

they are known in Washington as "the third rails" of American politics—touch them and die (politically, of course).

When Ideas Clash: Self-Rule and Limited Government

When Democrat Bernie Sanders ran for president in 2016, he vowed to raise taxes on wealthy people—those making $250,000 or more. Over on the Republican side, candidates Donald Trump and Ted Cruz insisted that lower taxes for everyone would boost economic performance.

In the 2016 election, voters made a clear choice: stop illegal immigration, fight crime, and address the consequences of international trade. With majorities in both the House and Senate, President Trump may be able to push through much of his agenda. However, it is normally very hard for winners to put their policies into effect—as a result of all the limits that Americans have placed on their own government.

Note the clash between two leading American ideas: self-rule and limited government. Self-rule says that the winning party should be able to put their policies into place. Jefferson expressed this point plainly: "The will of the majority," he wrote, is a "sacred principle" and "the only sure guardian of the rights of man."[11]

see for yourself 1.2

Go online and listen to the 2016 Republican National Convention reject former Democratic Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's foreign policy.

What Do You Think? Self-Rule Versus Limited Government

Many observers think we no longer have government by the people because it is too difficult for elected officials to get things done, even with a large majority. These reformers seek an easier path to government action. However, that prospect raises fears of a more active government. Which should we emphasize, self-rule or limited government? It's time to make your choice.

I'm with Thomas Jefferson. It should be easier for elected officials to enact the programs they promised. If they cannot do so, elections become less meaningful. When the people vote for something and their representatives fail to deliver, it fosters cynicism about the entire political process. Self-rule requires us to follow the people's mandate. If the majority does not like the results, it can express its displeasure in the next election.

I'm with James Madison. The checks and balances that make large-scale reforms difficult protect the United States from overbearing government and from sudden changes—whether rapidly expanding or cutting programs. The barriers to government action *should* be high. If the public really wants something, it will probably happen over time. Limited government is more important. Don't change the process.

Not sure? This is a formidable question. You may very well change your mind—maybe more than once—as you continue to read this book.

But another value, limited government, responds: Not so fast. We do not like government meddling in our private lives, so we make it very difficult for elected officials to follow through on their promises. Even a president who wins a national election by a large margin must still convince the majority in the House of Representatives and 60 percent of the Senate to vote his way.

The result is an important question for political scientists—and for all Americans: How should we balance self-rule and limited government? Erecting too many boundaries means that we undermine government by the majority. But if voters get everything the winning candidates promise them, the result could be a host of expensive new programs and policies.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- Americans *distrust their government* far more than people in most other democracies. The Constitution builds that distrust into our governing rules by providing for *limited government.* The result is a durable status quo.
- In other countries, when politicians are elected promising a program, they can usually deliver. In the United States, winners confront multiple barriers to fulfilling their campaign promises. That's the antigovernmental strain in American thinking.
- However, once programs do go into effect, they often prove popular and difficult to change.

Individualism

Political scientist John Kingdon was visiting his niece in Norway. She was expecting a baby and Professor Kingdon asked what she planned to do about her job. Casually, she replied that she would receive a full year's leave at 80 percent of her normal pay and that her company was required to give her job back after the leave. "Who pays for all this?" asked Professor Kingdon. "The government, of course," his niece replied. She was surprised the question had even come up. "Is it any different in the United States?" she asked innocently.[12]

As Kingdon explained, it is completely different in the United States: Advocates fought for years to pass the Family and Medical Leave Act (1993), which requires employers with more than fifty workers to allow up to twelve weeks of *unpaid* leave for pregnancy, adoption, illness, or military service. In 2012, the Supreme Court struck down part of the law by ruling that it could not cover state government employees.

Individualism: The idea that individuals, not the society, are responsible for their own well-being.

Americans generally value **individualism**: *The idea that individuals, not the society or the community or the government, are responsible for their own well-being.* We, as a society, do not pay for maternity leave. Instead, we expect private individuals and families to handle birth, or adoption, or caregiving.

Community Versus Individualism

The idea of individualism is a source of controversy in every nation. There are two ways to see any society: as a *community* or as a collection of *individuals.* Every nation includes both, but government policies can be designed to emphasize the community or to focus on individuals. Let's take a closer look at these two principles.

Countries that emphasize the community are called **social democracies.** Social democrats believe that members of a society are responsible for one another. They view government as a source of mutual assistance. The government provides citizens with the basics: good health insurance, retirement benefits, generous unemployment packages, and—as we saw in the Norwegian case—maternity benefits.

Social democracy: A government in which citizens are responsible for one another's well-being and use government policy to ensure that all are comfortably cared for.

In exchange, people pay high taxes. Almost half of a Norwegian's income goes to taxes. One effect of high taxation is to make it difficult for most citizens to get very rich. At the same time, the extensive welfare state makes it far less likely that people will live in poverty. Communal societies are far more equal than individualist ones—not just in opportunity, but in outcome. Most Western European nations are social democracies.

Social democracies are based on *solidarity,* the idea that people have a tight bond and are responsible for one another. Some societies exhibit a strong sense of solidarity. In general, this sense increases during wars, economic depressions, or other crises that get everyone to pull together. Scholars have found that more homogeneous societies—where people look alike, share the same values, and practice the same religion—exhibit higher rates of solidarity than very diverse societies.

American politics includes a streak of solidarity. Martin Luther King put it eloquently: "I am inevitably my brother's keeper because I am my brother's brother."[13] However, the commitment to solidarity rises and falls in the United States. Perhaps it will strengthen again, with the rising millennial generation?

Now let us turn to individualism. In this view, people and their families are responsible for their own welfare. The economist Milton Friedman famously wrote that "the world runs on individuals pursuing their separate interests." Leave people free to choose their interests, Friedman continued, and the public interest of the whole society will emerge.[14] Rather than taxing people and using funds to aid the less well-off, proponents of this perspective opt for low taxes. People who work hard will get ahead, and society will grow and prosper.

In 2016, a category 2 tornado struck the rural west Alabama community of Sapps in Pickens County. A volunteer uses a chain saw to clear away debris.

Individualists value the chance to get ahead more than they value a society where everyone is equal. In social democracies, government regulations aim to protect workers. In contrast, individualists oppose government controls and believe that private companies should be able to expand or contract their workforce as they see fit (as long as they hire and fire without discriminating). Individualism points toward limited government, faith in economic markets, and a strong emphasis on *negative liberty*.

Opinion polls confirm what political theorists have long suspected: Americans tend to lean more to individualism than to social democracy—much more so than most other nations. In one prominent cross-national study, people were asked which is more important: being free to pursue life goals (individualism) or making sure that nobody in society is in need (community). The American majority (58%) chose freedom, whereas most people in nations such as Germany and Spain chose taking care of those in need.

The Roots of American Individualism: Opportunity and Discord

Americans lean toward individualism and away from social democracy. Why? Two famous explanations look to the past. One finds the answer in golden opportunities. A second emphasizes social and racial discord.

Golden Opportunity. For centuries, most Europeans and Asians lived as serfs or peasants working small plots of land. Powerful rulers kept them firmly in their place—there was little chance for individuals to get ahead by working hard. In early America, by contrast, there appeared to be endless land and opportunity. With hard work and a little luck, anyone (at least any white male) could earn a decent living and perhaps even a fortune. Stories about early settlers clearing their own land were later reinforced by images of rugged individuals on the western frontier. Hard workers relied on themselves—not the government.

Individualism in historical memory: At high noon on April 22, 1889, bugles sounded and a great mob—lined up impatiently outside the territory—surged across the border and snatched up as much land as they could stake out. Although the government sponsored the land giveaway, the image that sticks is of the people grabbing their land for themselves. Oklahoma still honors the scalawags that snuck in early (or sooner) and staked the best land—which is where the motto "The Sooner State" comes from.

There is a lot of myth in these stories. Frontier life was less about brave individualism and more about communities. Settlers could not build a barn, a church, or a meetinghouse without their neighbors' help. But the image of hardy individuals on the frontier remains a powerful ideal in American political culture. And there was an important truth at its core: Few societies have ever offered so many individuals as much opportunity to rise and prosper as early America did.[15]

Social Conflict. Another explanation for American individualism emphasizes the enormous differences within our society: The country is too big and the population too diverse to develop a sense of solidarity. What, after all, did Calvinist Yankees in New England have in common with Roman Catholics in Baltimore or Anglican planters in Virginia—much less Spanish speakers in Florida or Texas? Moreover, a nation that included four million black slaves by 1860 had a terrible divide running through its heart.

By the 1830s still another source of division had arisen. Immigrants were arriving by the tens (and later hundreds) of thousands—speaking different languages and practicing what seemed like strange customs. Each generation of immigrants added to the American cacophony. For example, Irish Catholics (who arrived in the 1830s and 1840s) appeared strange and threatening to the English Protestants who had immigrated a century earlier. Could Catholics, with their allegiance to a foreign pope, really understand or uphold American values? All of these divisions made solidarity far more difficult to feel than in the more stable, homogeneous populations.

Which explanation is correct? Both are on target. Unprecedented economic opportunity and vast social divisions have reinforced individualism.

Who We Are: Individualism and Solidarity?

Yet Americans are not individualists pure and simple. Rather, the two themes—individualism and solidarity—always compete in American politics. Individualism is more robust and more often in evidence, but a sense of solidarity also unites the American population. We often pull together as a nation. We often take care of our neighbors and pass government programs to improve the lives of people we do not know. The United States may have deep divisions, but it is remarkable how quickly they can disappear. A substantial majority of Americans today are children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren of immigrants—many of whom were once regarded as strange and different.

All this raises another question to ponder: Where would you draw the line between solidarity and individualism? The answer directly relates to one of this book's central questions: *Who are we?* Take the test in "What Do You Think?" to learn where you stand on the continuum between rugged individualism and strong solidarity.

THE BOTTOM LINE

» American politics includes both individualism and solidarity.

» Different leaders, parties, groups, and individuals weigh the two values in different ways. However, compared to other nations, the United States is very much at the individualist end of the spectrum.

What Do You Think?

Individualism Versus Solidarity

Please score yourself on the following ten statements:
0 = Disagree strongly
1 = Disagree
2 = Agree
3 = Agree strongly

1. It is the responsibility of the government to take care of poor people who cannot take care of themselves.	0 1 2 3
2. Everyone should have health insurance in case they become ill.	0 1 2 3
3. In fact, everyone should have the *same* health insurance. It doesn't make sense for some people to get better care than others just because they can afford it.	0 1 2 3
4. I'd be willing to pay a *little more* in taxes so no person in America goes hungry or homeless.	0 1 2 3
5. I'd be willing to pay a *lot more* in taxes so that everyone in America has a pretty decent life.	0 1 2 3
6. I agree with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "I am inevitably my brother's keeper because I am my brother's brother [and my sister's sister] . . . the betterment of the poor enriches the rich."	0 1 2 3
7. I don't believe big companies should be permitted to fire people without providing two months' salary and some retraining.	0 1 2 3
8. Most Americans want the same things out of life.	0 1 2 3
9. We should think about others as much as we think about ourselves.	0 1 2 3
10. It is wrong to step over others to get ahead in life.	0 1 2 3

Scoring

0–5 You are truly a rugged individualist!
5–14 You are largely an individualist.
15–20 You are a moderate who sees both sides of the issue.
20–24 You are a social democrat.
25–30 You are a true-blue believer in solidarity!

Now, speak with someone who scored very differently from you. Try to explain how and why you came to hold your views.

The American Dream

Benjamin Franklin perfected a classic American literary form—tips for getting rich. Anyone, he assured his readers, could be successful by following a formula: be frugal ("A penny saved is a penny earned"), hardworking ("No gains without pains"), steady ("Little strokes fell great oaks"), bold ("God helps those who help themselves"), and—most important—morally upright ("Leave your vices, though ever so dear").[16]

Franklin summarized what later became known as the American dream: *If you are talented and work hard, you can achieve personal (and especially financial) success.* A popular historian, James Truslow Adams, was the first to actually call this doctrine an American dream: "a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement."[17] The idea scarcely changes across generations. "The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one," averred President Bill Clinton, more than two centuries after Ben Franklin. "If you work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given abilities will take you."[18]

Spreading the Dream

The legacy of the Revolutionary War, according to historian Gordon Wood, was the spread of the American dream to all classes. National leaders originally imagined that they were establishing a classical republic, such as Athens, in which a few outstanding men would govern the people. Instead, the Revolution established the common people as the basis of government and gave them an unprecedented chance to make their fortunes. What did the mass of people care about? "Making money and getting ahead," wrote Wood. Yes, the goal was vulgar, material, and crass. But opportunity had never been available on such a broad scale before.[19]

Enabling the dream of success remains an important part of any policy debate. Will a proposal help small business? Will it create jobs? Will it stifle entrepreneurs? Immigrants still come to the United States in large numbers—far more than to any other country—partly to pursue the dreams of success.

Challenging the Dream

As with every important idea, the American dream generates conflict. Critics raise two questions: Has the system become rigged to favor some (usually the wealthy) over others? And is the pursuit of wealth an undesirable value, either on its own merits or because it crowds out other important values?

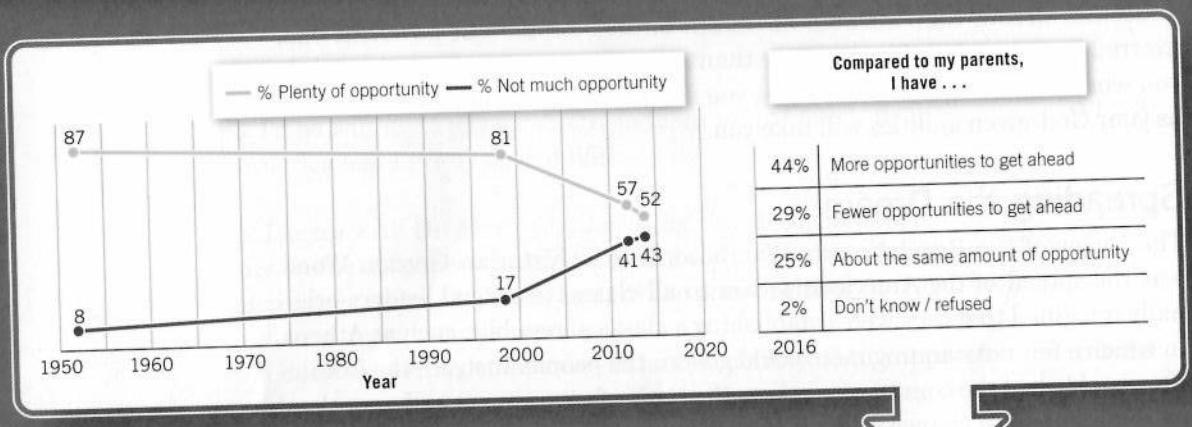
Is the System Tilted Toward the Wealthy? Some critics question whether the American dream is still open to everyone or whether it has grown biased toward the rich and powerful. For much of U.S. history, including the boom years after World War II, middle-class incomes rose faster than incomes

INFO/DATA: In the United States, Fewer Believe There Is "Opportunity to Get Ahead"

Although the American dream remains a shimmering ideal for many, in recent years the public has been less likely to share this vision. A declining number agree that the United States provides "plenty of opportunity" so that "anyone who works hard can go as far as they want." Some attribute this loss of faith to declining economic opportunities available to the middle and working classes.

1. Do you think that you are likely to have a better life than your parents? Polling results show that most Americans thought so until around 2010—then they became more pessimistic. What do you think explains the change?

2. Which opportunities do most Americans feel are hardest for young people to obtain?



Compared to my parents, I have . . .

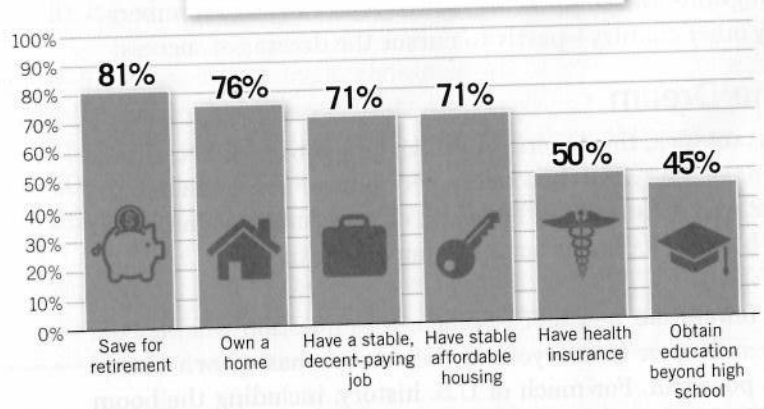
44%	More opportunities to get ahead
29%	Fewer opportunities to get ahead
25%	About the same amount of opportunity
2%	Don't know / refused

2016

The middle-class lifestyle is increasingly out of reach for millennials

(Compared to 20 or 30 years ago)

I think it is harder for young people today to . . .



Source: University of Michigan National Election Survey; Gallup; MacArthur Foundation

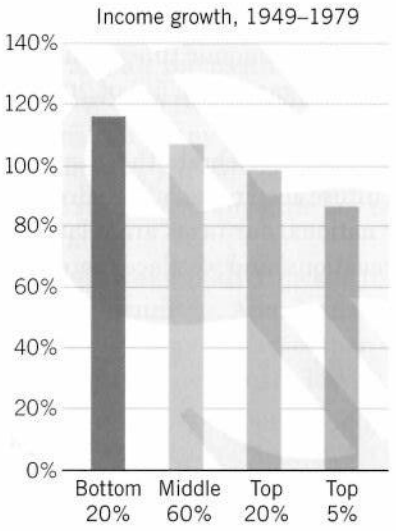


FIGURE 1.5A *Between 1949 and 1979, those on the bottom saw their earnings grow faster than those on the top. . . . (Robert Frank)*

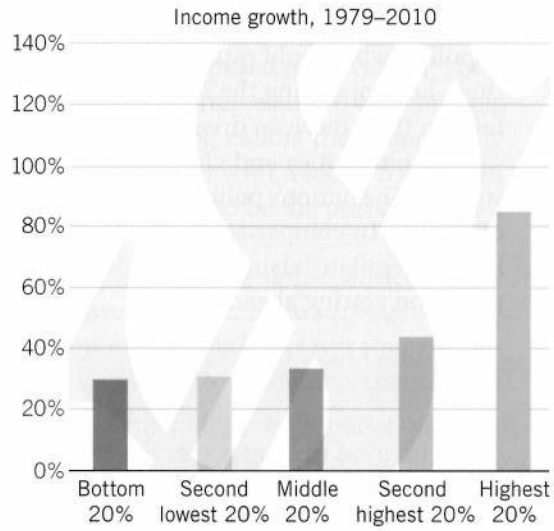


FIGURE 1.5B . . . *but look how that changed after 1979. Now those on the bottom have little income growth whereas the wealthy have rapid growth. Is this a bad thing? Americans disagree. (Russell Sage Foundation)*

at the top. Then, starting around 1979, this trend changed. Money began to flow to the wealthiest more than to the other classes. Figures 1.5A and 1.5B compare the two periods.

Today, the top 1 percent of Americans holds more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined. Three million people enjoy more wealth than do 270 million others. Sixty million Americans at the bottom of the charts own almost nothing—one-tenth of 1 percent of the national wealth. And inequality continues to rise, as the gap between richest and poorest is widening fastest in U.S. metro areas with high concentrations of well-paying jobs in information, technology, and finance. Many social scientists now argue that the chance of moving up—from poverty to wealth—is fading in the United States. Critics—both liberal and conservative—increasingly challenge the system for not offering real equality of opportunity.[20]

Does the American Dream Promote the Wrong Values? A second critique of the American dream questions the chase for wealth as a human value. Environmentalists criticize the damage caused by big houses, sprawling suburbs, gas-guzzling cars, and opulent lifestyles. Others cite the harm to old-fashioned communal ideals. "These dark days will be worth all they cost us," said President Franklin Roosevelt during the depths of the Great Depression, "if they teach us that our true destiny is . . . to minister . . . to our fellow man." Repeatedly, he urged Americans to rethink their basic values before an upturn in the stock market "dulled our moral sense." Voices such as his have questioned the pursuit of economic success to the exclusion of community and social justice.[21]

The capitalists who celebrate wealth often have to wrestle with economic populists who would rather share it. During difficult economic times—such as those accompanying the "Great Recession," which began in the fall of 2008—faith in the American dream lags.

Despite critics and challenges, Americans usually celebrate the gospel of success. The nation's politics, economics, and culture accommodate the dreams of wealth. In comparison with other wealthy nations, our taxes are relatively low, we regulate business less, we take fewer vacations, and we place more emphasis on getting ahead.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- The American dream is the belief that anyone who works hard can get ahead and grow wealthy.
- Critics argue that hard work is no longer enough to achieve the dream. They make two criticisms: the poor and middle classes are falling farther behind the wealthy because of bias in the political economy, and other values are more important than wealth.
- Despite the critics, the dream remains a powerful American idea.

Equality

When Alexis de Tocqueville, a French visitor to America (and one of our favorite authors) arrived in the United States in 1831, he was amazed by the widespread equality. In one of his first letters home, he reported watching servers in a tavern sit down at the next table to eat and drink alongside the guests. Here was a society where people from all ranks shook hands, discussed politics, and chased money. Everyone seemed to be equals.

Tocqueville distilled this thought into the first sentence of his great book *Democracy in America*: "No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly . . . than the equality of condition." In a world that was still full of aristocrats and inherited privilege, American society embodied the great idea at the heart of the Declaration of Independence: "All men [and women] are created equal."[22]

Equality: All citizens enjoy the same privileges, status, and rights before the laws.

Equality means that *every citizen enjoys the same privileges, status, and rights before the laws*. There are three different types of equality to consider when analyzing the concept: *social*, *political*, and *economic*.

Three Types of Equality

Social equality: All individuals enjoy the same status in society.

Social equality means that all individuals enjoy the same status in society. There are no American barons or archdukes who inherit special benefits when they are born. Except for slavery, there have never been fixed social classes.

Few American politicians boast of noble origins or good family lineage. On the contrary, for the past 150 years candidates have flaunted (or invented) their working-class roots. Even very wealthy politicians often claim to have humble origins (for many years, they boasted about the log cabins they supposedly grew up in). An old cliché in American politics, one with a lot of truth to it, is the saying that any little boy or girl could grow up to be the president—or a millionaire.

Political equality means that every citizen has the same political rights and opportunities. Americans enjoyed universal white, male *suffrage*—or the right to vote—much earlier than did citizens of most nations. Over time the opportunity to vote spread. Today there are lively debates about whether we still ensure everyone an equal opportunity to affect the political process.

Political equality: All citizens have the same political rights and opportunities.

Some reformers suggest, for example, that if everyone is to have the same chance to influence the political process, we should remove money from elections. Otherwise, the wealthy will have outsized influence. The quest for political equality raises many other issues: Does everyone enjoy an equal right to a fair trial—or have the costs of going to court elevated this basic value beyond the reach of many people? Does the voting system make it too difficult for some people to register and cast their ballots? Does every citizen have an *equal opportunity* to influence the political process and are they all treated the same way before the law?

Economic equality focuses on differences in wealth. When President Washington toured the country in 1790, there were few very wealthy individuals and little poverty. For more than a century and a half, the nation truly was exceptional in its economic equality.[23] Today the United States has changed dramatically—toward inequality.

Economic equality: A situation in which there are only small differences in wealth between citizens.

Should we worry about economic inequality? Cleveland Cavaliers forward LeBron James (left) dunks the ball against the Utah Jazz. James makes more than $70 million a year for playing basketball and endorsing products. Is that too much for a superstar—even one as good as James? Should we change the rules so that the wealthy get less and poor people more?

How Much Economic Inequality Is Too Much?

Median: A statistical term for the number in the middle or the case that has an equal number of examples above and below it.

Inequality in America has reached levels not seen in almost a century. One illustration of national differences in economic inequality arises from the "salary gap." In 1965, the **median** (or typical) American chief executive officer (CEO) made twenty-six times more than a typical worker in his or her company. In Japan today the figure is roughly the same. But in the contemporary United States, the median CEO makes between three hundred and five hundred times the salary of the average employee (depending on the study). Is this a problem for the idea that "all men are created equal"? People in many countries would answer "yes." Too much inequality, they say, divides society.

As we have seen in our discussion of the American dream, our public policies (and public opinion) often endorse the race to wealth. Why not let the winners—hedge-fund managers, basketball stars, successful musicians, bank executives, and breakthrough entrepreneurs—enjoy fabulous success? Some activists charge that the richest 1 percent take advantage of everyone else; those on the other side dismiss such talk as fostering "socialism" and "class warfare." In fact, this is an old debate stretching back through time.

Opportunity or Outcome?

Many Americans accept high levels of economic inequality, contending that these are not fatal to our hopes for an egalitarian society. That's because of an important distinction between *equal opportunity* and *equal outcome.*

Equal opportunity: The idea that every American has the same chance to influence politics and achieve economic success.

Equal opportunity is the idea that every American has a similar chance in life. Politically, this means each person gets one vote and the process is transparent and open to all. In economics, it means that every individual gets a fair shot at achieving the American dream. Whether you are white or black, Anglo or Latino, male or female, rich or poor, you have a similar opportunity to influence the political process and to win economic success.

Equal outcome: The idea that citizens should have roughly equal economic circumstances.

Equal outcome, in contrast, is the idea that a society guarantees not only opportunity but also results. Some nations reserve a minimum number of seats in the national legislature for women or members of specific ethnic groups. And, as we have already seen, others keep their taxes high and offer extensive social benefits, knowing that this arrangement will keep successful people from getting too far ahead of everyone else.

Today, the United States aims for equal opportunity. The winners fly in private jets; the losers may end up with nothing. Questions—and hard political choices—about equal opportunity remain. How do we give people a real chance to affect the governing process? How much education is enough to help ensure that an individual can make it in the marketplace? Do we need to provide early childhood reading programs? Offer English-language programs for everyone who is not fluent? And what should we do about past injustice? Does the long legacy of slavery, segregation, and repressive policies toward Native American Indians require our society to offer special forms of compensation to these groups?

These questions return us to the same policy debates we introduced during the discussion of positive and negative liberty. Should we guarantee the basics—or simply protect individual rights and let every person run the great race alone? As you can see, debates about equality lead back to debates about freedom (positive or negative) and individualism.

Might the gap between rich and poor grow so large that it undermines equality of opportunity? For most of the nation's history, middle-class Americans had the highest average incomes in the world. However, the percentage of Americans who are middle class shrunk from 61 in 1971 to 50 by 2015[24] (see Figure 1.6). Meanwhile, the very wealthy have pulled away from the rest of society. As the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, liberals warn that growing disparities are creating a land of a few billionaires and many hungry children with grim prospects. Conservatives respond that the effort to redistribute wealth from rich to poor discourages entrepreneurs from innovating and generating new wealth. Expanded wealth at the top, they say, will help the many through job creation.

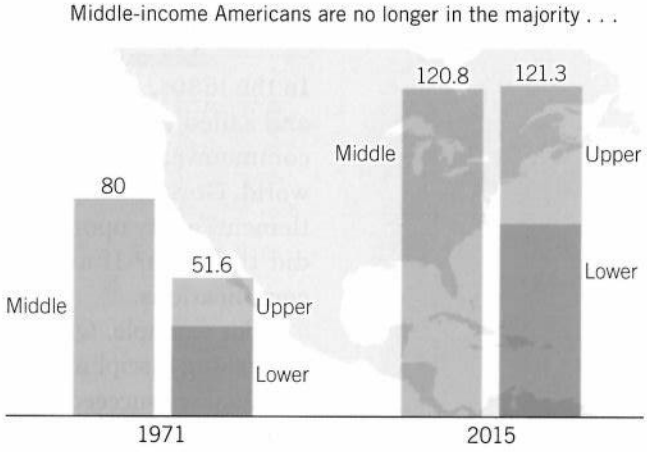


FIGURE 1.6 *The middle class is losing ground in the United States. (Pew Social Research)*

Over time, the United States has gone from the most equal society in the world to one that is considerably less equal than other wealthy nations. The past thirty-five years, in particular, have seen a sharp spike in inequality. American politics has come to emphasize other ideas—negative liberty, individualism, the American dream of getting ahead—over equality. Still, we live in a dynamic and fluid society. Today many Americans, both conservatives and liberals, have begun to call for renewed efforts to increase equality of opportunity.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- Equality means that every citizen enjoys the same privileges, status, and rights before the law.
- Equality applies to social status, political rights, and economic conditions.
- Today, America generally aims for *equal opportunity* rather than *equal outcome*, although heated discussions rage over what society must provide to ensure equal opportunity.

Religion

In the 1630s, a large contingent of Puritans escaped European persecution and sailed to New England with an ambitious aim: to establish a biblical commonwealth that would serve as a Christian model for the rest of the world. Governor John Winthrop, in his shipboard sermon, called their settlement "a city upon a hill" and expected "the eyes of all people on us." How did they fare? If anyone really was watching, they soon saw unexpected complications.

For example, Quakers from Pennsylvania—whom the Puritans despised for lacking discipline—began sailing north to convert the New Englanders. If the Quakers succeeded, they would subvert the whole idea of a model Puritan society. New England's women, the ministers worried, might be especially vulnerable to Quaker heresies. The authorities banned Quakers from Massachusetts under threat of having an ear cut off (one each for the first and second offenses), their tongues pierced by hot pokers (third offense), and finally death. Quaker martyrs piously and joyfully challenged the Puritan authorities. Four were hanged before English authorities ordered an end to the punishment.

This story reflects the importance of religion, the intense competition between sects, and a missionary fervor about saving the world. Even today, politicians of every stripe repeat the idea of a "city on a hill" (although few realize that Winthrop was quoting the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament).

Still a Religious Country

Religion plays an enduring role in American politics and society. The centrality of religion may not surprise you. But it is a powerful example of American exceptionalism. As most nations grow wealthier, their religious fervor wanes. Citizens in developed countries, from Britain and France to Japan and South Korea, tell pollsters that God is not very important in their lives. In contrast, Americans maintain high (and by some measures, rising) levels of religiosity. Some 86 percent of Americans say they believe in God, almost 63 percent belong to a church, and nearly 47 percent attend church regularly (see Figure 1.7). To find higher levels you have to go to poorer nations such as India, Egypt, and Indonesia.[25] However, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated—who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular"—appears to be growing.

So Many Religions

Americans have a lot of religions to choose from. One recent survey found sixteen different Christian denominations with more than a million members each.[26] That is just the beginning. Jews number over 6.7 million, Muslims some 3 million, and seven other non-Christian groups have over one hundred thousand adherents each (two of the fastest growing are Wiccans and Pagans).[27] In contrast, many other nations have a single major faith, often supported by the government through tax dollars.

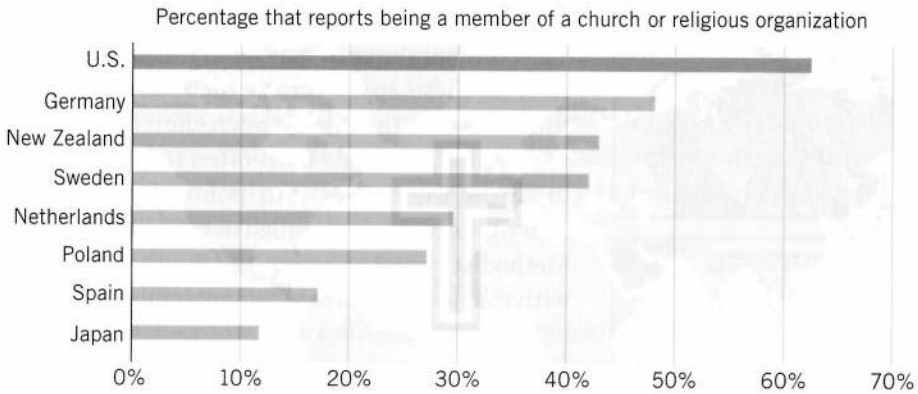


FIGURE 1.7 *Look how American religiosity stands out. As nations grow wealthy, religion nearly always loses its importance. The United States is the great exception. (World Values Survey)*

Why so many religions? From the start, different colonies began with distinct religious affiliations. By forbidding the federal government from boosting any official faith, the Constitution kept the field open for any new preacher with a religious idea that might attract a following. Because none can win official recognition, each religious institution is only as strong as the congregation it can muster.

This open market explains why new religions spring up all the time. It does not explain why Americans respond. One of the great mysteries of our political culture is why Americans continue to worship, whereas citizens in other wealthy nations show a declining interest in religion (see Figure 1.7).

Religious observance is not the same throughout the United States. Texas and Georgia (proud members of the "Bible Belt") have high religiosity, Florida and Missouri are in the middle, Colorado and Wisconsin are not especially religious, and Maine is the least religious of all. Generational change is also at work: Although millennials continue to report high rates of religious faith, an unusual number do not affiliate with any denomination. Most believe in God but not organized religions.[28] In surveys asking about formal religious affiliation, nearly a quarter of Americans, and more than a third of millennials, responded "none."

The Politics of Religion

How is religion relevant to politics? The First Amendment declares, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Thomas Jefferson described "a wall of separation between church and state." And yet America's energetic religious life—marked through our history by great evangelical revivals—injects three different types of political issues into American politics.

First, there is the question of what exactly the Constitution forbids. May teachers lead prayers in public schools? May students in the bleachers organize

● *What constitutes religious teaching?*

prayers before football games? May judges post the Ten Commandments in a courthouse? Questions such as these spark intense debates about just where to draw the line between church and state.

Second, religious faith often inspires people to throw themselves into political issues. The civil rights movement spilled out from Baptist and Methodist churches across the South, brimming with religious rhetoric, religious symbols, and religious zeal. The opponents of racial equality—arguing for slavery and segregation—also framed their response in religious terms. In American politics, both sides often invoke God. The controversies swirling around the politics of peace, abortion, the environment, equality, same-sex marriage, and many other issues have all, to varying extents, made the same leap from pulpit to politics. Today, conservatives are more likely to take their faith into the political arena, but this has not always been true.

Third, religious fervor sometimes fosters a missionary sense in American politics. As the nation expanded westward, Americans declared their "manifest destiny"—God had given an entire continent to his chosen people. During the Cold War, American leaders constantly invoked God as a way of contrasting the United States with communist nations. Congress added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance (in 1954) and "In God We Trust" to paper money (1955). John Winthrop's idea—America as a model for the world—echoes from one generation to the next.

THE BOTTOM LINE

» Religion plays an enduring role in American politics and society. This is unusual—almost unique—among wealthy countries.

» Americans have an unusually large number of faiths to choose from, although younger people are less likely to affiliate with an organized religion.

» Religious politics raise questions about the role and the extent of religion in our national public life. They inspire political participation on a host of issues—from civil rights to abortion. And they foster a missionary sense in American foreign policy.

How Do Ideas Affect Politics?

Most political scientists agree that the seven ideas of this chapter are central to American society. But how do these ideas influence our politics? There are two familiar answers. Either ideas influence our culture or they operate through our institutions. There is still another possibility to bear in mind, however: Perhaps they have a life all their own.

Ideas in American Culture

Political culture: The orientation of citizens of a state toward politics.

Each nation has a unique **political culture**, constructed over the years by a people and its leaders. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in his classic work *The Interpretation of Cultures*, described culture as the stories a group tells about itself. Ideas such as liberty, the fear of government, individualism, and the American dream together are the foundation of American political culture. They are the stories we tell about ourselves.

A culture shapes the way people think about politics and government. Culture develops slowly over time, shaped by history and experience. Colonial Americans' shared beliefs, stories, and mental habits—their culture—inspired the founding generation to develop a Constitution that limits the power of government. Why did the framers add a Bill of Rights to the Constitution? Their abiding faith in individualism. Why are there so many checks and balances in our national government? A fear of too much government dating back to colonial times. Why do we regulate and tax less than other nations? The American dream's gospel of success. This shared culture leads men and women to fight for policies that reflect freedom or democracy; policies that reflect social-democratic solidarity are more difficult to win because they resonate more faintly through American culture. American hopes and fears often seem peculiar to people in other nations—just as their hopes and fears may not make sense to us.

The Ideas in Political Institutions

A different perspective suggests that ideas operate through political institutions. The institutions are key to political action.

James Madison explained the *institutional perspective*. Past political theory expected republican citizens to virtuously seek the public interest. But, Madison continued sardonically in the *Federalist Papers*, "enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm."[29] The Constitution did not ask people to be virtuous; instead, it developed a government that would operate smoothly even if its citizens were greedy and their leaders corrupt. The institution—the rules and organizations built into the government—would shape popular behavior.

Many political scientists follow Madison's argument. It is our governing institutions, starting with the Constitution, that shape American political behavior. From an institutional perspective, the barriers to enacting new programs emerge not from a dislike of government but from the way the government is organized. The U.S. government is slow to act, according to this view, because we have *designed* it to be slow to act by building in multiple checks

and balances on every level of government. When Americans criticize their policy-makers for inaction, perhaps they miss the point: Gridlock is a consequence of the institutions we have inherited.

Culture or Institutions?

Although historians and sociologists tend to emphasize political culture, many political scientists are skeptical about its explanatory power. How, they ask, can something as static as national culture explain the fluid, fast-changing American political scene?

For example, the cultural perspective suggests that the United States has never passed national health insurance, supplied and paid for by the federal government, because Americans do not trust government. The institutional perspective counters that it is less a matter of popular belief and more the way we have designed the government. After all, they continue, Harry Truman won the presidential election of 1948 in part by promising national health insurance. But Congress—using the checks and balances central to our national government's institutions—buried the proposal.

Proponents of culture respond that cultural values are not meant to explain every possible political action. Events, leaders, movements, and government agencies all introduce change. But culture forms the boundary of those changes. It limits the possibilities, shapes our perceptions, and influences our reactions. When terrorists launch an attack, for example, the American response is driven by the types of institutions we have built to provide for the common defense—but the debate about that response is deeply influenced by the values and ideas we share.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- How do the foundational ideas influence politics? Political scientists point to three different ways.
- First, ideas shape American culture, which in turn affects our politics.
- Second—and most popular among political scientists—ideas operate through political institutions. We must study those institutions to appreciate how ideas shape politics and policies.
- Third, ideas may have their own independent power.

Conclusion: Culture and Institutions, Together

Do the ideas described in this chapter add up to a political culture that shapes the attitudes of American men and women? That cultural argument seems intuitive to many people. On balance, however, most political scientists underscore the importance of institutions.

As a political science student, you can decide for yourself on the relative power of ideas and institutions as you read this book. But you do not have to choose one or the other. We believe that culture and institutions together play a role in American politics. They reinforce each other. Yes, national institutions make it difficult to pass big national programs such as universal health insurance; and yes again, opponents invoke powerful cultural norms—such as individualism and liberty—to persuade Americans that such legislation threatens their values. For us, the most interesting question is how ideas, culture, and institutions (along with interests and individuals—the four "Is" introduced earlier in this chapter) all interact to shape American politics.

Finally, ideas have a power of their own—above and beyond the culture and institutions they have helped to shape. Ideas of liberty, democracy, or the American dream can move people to act. That is exactly what Captain (and Professor) Russell Burgos was thinking as the mortars flew into his post in northern Iraq.

As you read through this book, you will constantly encounter the seven ideas we have described in this chapter. Think about which seem most important and powerful to you. And pay attention to how they appear to operate—through the culture, through institutions, with a life of their own, or (as we believe) in all these ways at different times and in different circumstances.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- This book examines four key questions: Who governs, how does American politics work, what does government do, and who are we? Seven important ideas influence American politics. Each idea has at least two different interpretations—differences that spur intense political debates.

- *Freedom* means that the government will protect your life, liberty, and property from the coercion of others (including government) so that you can pursue the goals you define for yourself. In one view, freedom requires *positive government* action to make sure that everyone has the basics to permit them to pursue their goals. In another view, the government guarantees only *negative freedom*—the freedom to pursue your goals. You are free to succeed or to fail on your own, but there are no guarantees about food, or homes, or healthcare.

- *Self-rule* means that people govern themselves through clearly defined procedures such as elections. In a democracy, citizens participate directly in making government decisions. In a republic, the people rule indirectly through their elected representatives. The American system is a combination of the two, a democratic republic.

- Americans value *limited government*: They distrust government and place limits on the authority it can exercise.

- *Individualism* means that individuals—not society or the government—are responsible for their own well-being. For those who favor community or social democracy, the public interest is best served when members of a society use government to take care of one another. Americans take both an

individual and a communal view, but in contrast to many other nations, the individualistic view is more powerful.

- The *American dream* holds that if you are talented and work hard, you will succeed and grow wealthy. Critics argue that the system is rigged or that the dream promotes the wrong values. However, the dream remains a powerful force in American politics.

- *Equality* allows each citizen to enjoy the same privileges, status, and rights before the law. Some define equality as a matter of *opportunity*—the idea that every American has an equal chance. Others promote equal *outcome*—a guarantee of results. There are three types of equality to consider: Social equality means that all individuals enjoy the same status in society. Political equality guarantees every citizen the same rights and opportunities to participate in politics. Economic equality minimizes the gap between citizens' wealth and earnings.

- *Religion* plays an enduring role in American politics and society. The great question is how we limit government interference without limiting religion itself.

- These seven ideas mark Americans' beliefs as a people. They can shape politics through national culture, through political institutions, and through their own influence on Americans.

KEY TERMS

American exceptionalism, p. 10
Conservatives, p. 18
Democracy, p. 14
Economic equality, p. 29
Equality, p. 28
Equal opportunity, p. 30
Equal outcome, p. 30
Freedom, p. 11
Individualism, p. 20
Institutions, p. 6
Liberals, p. 18
Libertarians, p. 13
Median, p. 30
Negative liberty, p. 12
Political culture, p. 35
Political equality, p. 29
Positive liberty, p. 12
Rational-choice theory, p. 6
Republic, p. 4
Self-rule, p. 14
Social democracy, p. 21
Social equality, p. 28

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence boldly explains why "governments are instituted among men." Why? Why are governments formed? Do you agree with that assertion about government's most basic function?
2. *Liberty* is often described as the most important American idea. Describe the two different views of liberty. Which do you think is more accurate?
3. Review the seven principal "American ideas" we have identified in this chapter. Are *new* foundational ideas bubbling up in American politics today? What examples can you imagine?
4. The Declaration of Independence asserts that all men are endowed by their creator with the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Over time, Americans have extended that idea to more and more people, such as former slaves and women. Are there groups in our society today who are *not* getting the full benefits of this ideal?
5. What is the difference between a democracy and a republic? Which principle does contemporary American government reflect, or does it reflect both? If you were a Founder, which of these principles would you emphasize?
6. Think of the various groups that you belong to. How would you describe each group? And in what ways is each group part of larger American society?
7. There are three forms of equality—social, political, and economic. Define each.

8. Describe the two approaches to economic equality: opportunity and outcome.
9. When it comes to religion, the United States is different from most wealthy societies. How? How do young people differ from previous generations in their approach to religion?
10. Ideas shape both culture and institutions. Explain.

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