



# 1

## DEMOCRACY AND AMERICAN POLITICS

*After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:*

- Understand the nature of politics, government, and citizenship.
- Differentiate among the types of democracies that exist in the world and identify the qualities that make a government truly democratic.
- Examine the functions of government as well as some of the challenges and controversies that affect its ability to perform each function effectively.
- Identify the four basic American values and describe how these values help to define the character of American politics.
- Explore the primary political ideologies that have helped to inform contemporary political discourse in the United States.
- Understand how comparison and historical analysis can deepen our understanding of American politics.

### *Perspective: What Difference Does Democracy Make?*

In the United States, trains covered with bright, fanciful graffiti are often seen rolling down the tracks. The graffiti constitutes vandalism, but while vandalizing property by painting graffiti is illegal in most states and cities, authorities do not usually enforce the laws against it very strictly. In fact, some Americans admire graffiti as an elevated art form, romanticizing graffiti artists as individuals who thumb their noses at the government.

It is different in Singapore. In 1994, 18-year-old American student Michael Fay ran afoul of Singapore's stringent laws protecting order and cleanliness. Singaporean police arrested Fay for stealing highway signs and vandalizing a car

by scratching its paint. His court sentence: four months in jail, a fine of over \$2,000, and four strokes with a cane. The caning—a common punishment in Singapore—was administered with a six-foot long, one-inch-thick cane that can cause serious injury. Other acts that are not necessarily considered crimes in the United States but can draw similarly serious punishments in Singapore include spitting in public, selling chewing gum, or failing to flush the toilet in a public restroom.

Singapore was a British colony until it became independent in 1965. Today, it is a prosperous financial center and technology exporter. Average incomes in Singapore are somewhat higher than those in the United States; crime rates are low; and the country is very clean, partly because of its stringent punishments for graffiti and similar offenses that other countries would consider minor. Its government is one of the least corrupt in the world.

Although efficient and prosperous, Singapore is not a democracy. Its government regulates citizens' behavior tightly. Elections are held regularly, but the People's Action Party, which has governed without interruption since it led the country to independence more than 45 years ago, does not allow a significant opposition party to develop or function. It requires all political organizations to register with the government, and organizers of any public gathering of more than five people must obtain a special permit. This allows the government to regulate opposition activity. The Party also controls the media, all of which are owned by government-linked companies. Such control includes the banning of all political films and political television programs. In the 2015 election, the Party got 70 percent of the vote, winning 83 of the 89 seats in Singapore's Parliament.

By contrast, the United States is less efficient and less tightly organized than Singapore, but it is a democracy. The media are not controlled by the government. The right of groups to organize and gather publicly is guaranteed in the First Amendment to the Constitution. And citizens who criticize public officials are protected against harassment. But the government in a democracy is not as free as a government like Singapore's to put laws in place that lack broad support. Harsh anti-littering laws with physical punishment and jail time would not be tolerated by the public, even though such laws might produce a very clean country.

Actually, Singapore probably presents the most attractive instance of a non-democracy that we can come up with, since most non-democracies are not particularly well organized or well run. Singapore's government avoids corrupt practices, it runs efficiently, and it has helped the country to prosper economically. But the lack of political freedom in Singapore has its costs. The people of Singapore are much more politically passive than Americans. While 17 percent of Americans discuss politics frequently, only 4 percent of Singaporeans do. Forty-one percent of them say that they never discuss politics at all. As far as political participation is concerned, 76 percent of Americans say that they would be willing to attend a lawful demonstration, whereas only 24 percent of Singaporeans would.<sup>1</sup> <<

## GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

When the people in a country need to consider changing the way things are done, they engage in **politics**, the process by which collective decisions—decisions that are binding for everyone in the country—are made for a country.<sup>2</sup> *Collective decisions* include such things as a law, a system of taxes, or a social program. We use *process* in this definition very broadly to include not only the actions of government officials but also all of the considerations that influence them, such as elections, public opinion, and the media. *Politics* consists of all the factors that contribute to collective decisions.

For example, in 2017, when President Trump called for repealing the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare), many voices contributed to that debate and to the political process that followed:

**politics** The process by which decisions that are binding for everyone in the country are made, such as a law, a system of taxes, or a social program.

- policy schools, which provided scholarly assessments of various sorts of health care delivery systems
- the AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) and labor unions, which ran advertisements opposing the repeal
- insurance groups and business organizations that lobbied for or against the repeal
- the cable news channel MSNBC, which provided anti-repeal press coverage, and Fox News, another cable channel, which offered pro-repeal coverage



Tom Williams / Getty Images

**Republicans' attempts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act led to vigorous protest, including by disabled Americans, some of whom staged sit-ins at congressional office buildings.**

- opponents of repeal, who conducted raucous protests at town hall meetings held by members of Congress
- ordinary citizens, who talked to one another about the merits of the proposals
- parents who brought disabled children to Washington to ask Congress to keep their health benefits intact
- members of Congress who engaged in arm-twisting, deals, and bargaining as they attempted to craft and pass, or persuade colleagues to vote for or against, the legislation

All of these voices were part of the politics associated with the decisions about whether, and how, to reform the U.S. health care system.

To facilitate the decision-making process, regardless of who participates (or is allowed to participate), every country has a **government**. A government helps a country to maintain internal order, to interact with other countries, and to develop laws and policies. What sets government apart from any other group is that only the government has the right to make decisions that are binding on everyone within the nation's borders and that the government has the right to use force (the threat of fines or jail) to ensure that the laws are followed and to implement its decisions.<sup>3</sup> Other groups can make more limited decisions, but they are prohibited from using force to implement them. A corporation such as Microsoft, for instance, can decide to design the Windows operating system for personal computers in a particular way, but that decision is binding only on those who voluntarily buy its product. Furthermore, Microsoft cannot use force to implement its decision. By contrast, the government of the United States can pass a law outlawing child pornography for everyone in the country and can use force to make sure everyone follows it.

Every person living in a country, then, is required to obey its laws—citizens and noncitizens alike. **Citizens** are people who are fully qualified and legally recognized as members of a country. However, not everyone living in a country at a given time is considered a citizen. Citizens of other countries who are visiting briefly or who have obtained permission to work or pursue their education in the country for a long or even indefinite period of time are not citizens. Also, several million undocumented immigrants live and work in the United States. But whether they are citizens or

**government** The set of people who make decisions that are binding for all people in the country and have the right to use force and coercion to implement their choices.

**citizens** Members of a country's population who are legally recognized as subjects or nationals of the country.



AP Photo / David Goldman

**Naturalization ceremonies, in which noncitizens take an oath of allegiance to the United States and formally become American citizens, are held periodically around the country, usually in nondescript government offices but occasionally at special venues such as the Turner Field baseball stadium in Atlanta.**

not, all who reside within a country's borders are both protected by the country's laws and required to obey them.

Various types of governments exist, and political scientists distinguish between them according to the basis of their power—in other words, where they get their right to rule. Many countries throughout the world have some form of nondemocratic government, in which a small group of people govern and the rest of the citizens of the country have no direct voice in what the government does. Important types of non-democracy include government by army officers (Thailand, for instance), government by a hereditary monarch (Saudi Arabia), government by a single party that allows no other parties to operate (Singapore), and government by religious leaders (Iran). In this chapter, however, we will focus on democratic government because that is the form of government in the United States.

## DEMOCRACY AS A FORM OF GOVERNMENT

In a **democracy**, all citizens can participate in the making of governmental policy, at least to some extent, even if indirectly. Though *democracy* is generally defined as “rule by citizens,” this definition is more an ideal than a concrete, observable phenomenon. As we will see in this section, a variety of factors influence how fully and how directly citizens in a democracy share in the rule of the country. In fact, there is no country in the world where all citizens have precisely equal roles in making the decisions of the country. However, a number of countries approximate the ideal well enough that we call them democracies. As shown in Figure 1.1, 116 countries—more than half of all countries in the world—are democracies.

### DIRECT DEMOCRACY

The closest approximation to rule by all citizens is **direct democracy**, in which all of the citizens of a community gather to decide policies for that community. It was the mode of government in some ancient Greek city-states, and it still exists today in New England town meetings where all citizens come together to discuss and decide issues.<sup>4</sup> Direct democracy is possible only in a small community with relatively simple issues to decide. Even a direct democracy does not exactly accomplish “rule by the citizens,” at least in the sense that all citizens contribute equally to the decision-making process. As in any group formed to accomplish assigned tasks, some people are more experienced or articulate than others, so not everyone is able to contribute equally. In fact, a direct democracy may actually express the will of only a fairly small group of leaders.

### INDIRECT DEMOCRACY

Direct democracy is impossible in a complex, modern country such as the United States. How could millions of U.S. citizens come together to make decisions? Faced with thousands of complex, detailed issues each year, how could all citizens participate adequately and still do anything else with their lives? Accordingly, almost all democracies today are **indirect democracies**, also called *representative democracies*. In an indirect democracy, all citizens vote to choose, from among alternative candidates, the people who will be in charge of making decisions and

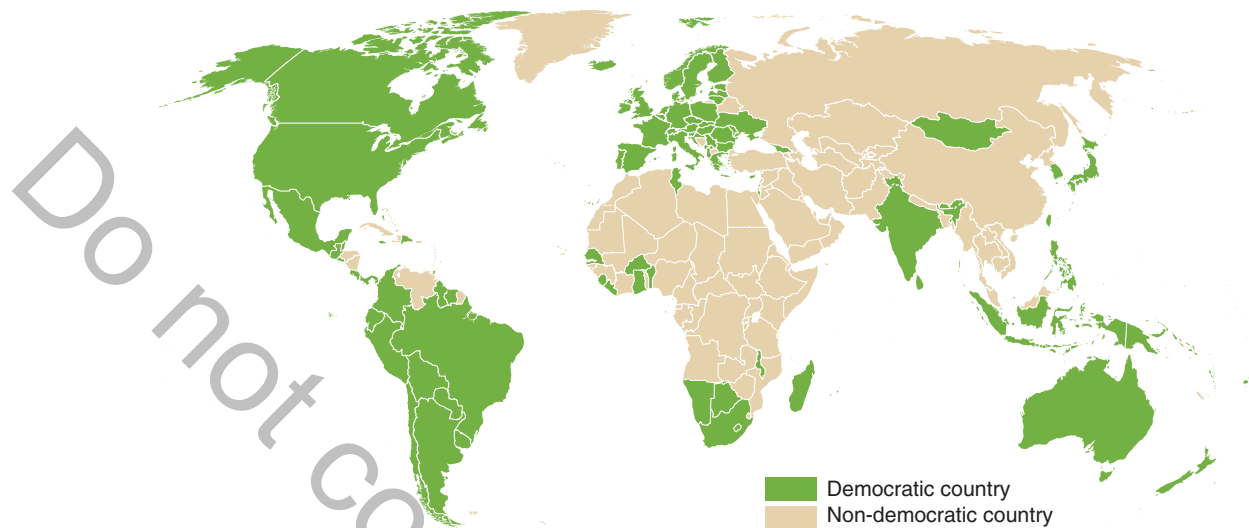
**democracy** Rule by the people.

**direct democracy** Democracy in which all of the people of a community gather to decide policies for the community.

**indirect democracy** Democracy in which the people do not decide policies for the community themselves but elect representatives to decide the policies.

FIGURE 1.1

## Democracies of the World



Source: Freedom House, *Electoral Democracies 2018*.

implementing policies. In the United States, for example, the people of a city may elect a mayor and members of a city council; residents of each state elect a governor and other statewide officials as well as members of the state's legislature. Every eligible U.S. citizen can vote to elect the president and members of Congress to represent them.

What is needed for indirect democracy to work well? Obviously, elections are a basic requirement. But are elections enough? Earlier in the chapter, we explained that Singapore holds elections regularly, but we noted that in the 2015 election, the People's Action Party, which has ruled the country since 1965, got 70 percent of the vote, winning 83 of the 89 seats in Singapore's Parliament. The government achieved this result by suppressing opposition. Such outcomes show that elections alone do not a democracy make. Thus, effective indirect democracy goes beyond merely holding elections; a number of other pieces must also be in place to ensure that the elections offer citizens a chance to affect decisions through their vote:

- open elections
- broad participation in the elections
- freedom of speech and media
- the right to organize
- majority rule . . . but with protection for minority rights

The first four requirements are discussed in this section. The twin requirements of majority rule and protection of minority rights are discussed later in this chapter in the section titled "The Challenges of Democracy."

The first requirement, of course, is that elections must be held regularly, and all qualified citizens must have an equal right to participate. Which citizens are considered "qualified" may evolve over time. Women's right to vote is viewed differently today than it was in the early nineteenth century, for instance, and in every country, there is some age below which citizens are not considered qualified to vote. But a democracy is limited if it denies the right to citizens who are widely regarded as qualified. Democracy in the United States was limited by the systematic denial of African Americans' right to vote in much of the South until 1965, when Congress passed the Voting Rights Act.

For Collection Period Beginning Oct. 1, 1956 and Ending on Feb. 1, 1957

**POLL TAX RECEIPT**

COUNTY OF MONTGOMERY, ALA., 1-21-1957 No. 2425

RECEIVED OF Rosa Louise Parks Male  Female

Dollars (\$ 1.50)

For Poll Taxes at \$1.50 per year for the following years: 1956 () 1957 ( )

District No. \_\_\_\_\_ Precinct No. This Year 37 Precinct No. Last Year \_\_\_\_\_ Color Coe

Countersigned By John Dravis State Comptroller. \_\_\_\_\_ Tax Collector

For much of the twentieth century, it was legal to require citizens to pay a poll tax as part of their qualification for voting. Rosa Parks herself paid \$1.50 in 1957 for the right to vote in Alabama.

There should also be broad participation in the elections. This is a matter of degree—there is never 100 percent participation. But as we will see in Chapter 9, countries vary a good deal in how fully their citizens participate in elections. This is partly a function of citizens' own willingness to honor their responsibility to participate, but it is also a function of whether the government makes it easy for citizens to vote or sets up impediments to make it inconvenient for them to do so.

A third basic requirement of democracy, beyond the formal arrangements of voting and elections, is sufficient individual freedom to allow open debate. This in turn requires freedom of speech and a free, uncontrolled media. A country might hold regular elections and yet not be a democracy. Singapore is such a country. Another good example is Russia, which holds regular elections with alternative candidates but maintains such stringent governmental control over the media that the country cannot be considered a full democracy.

Finally, citizens of a democracy need to be able to organize independently into political parties and other organizations to pool their political efforts. Again, countries may hold elections yet fail to meet this requirement. For instance, China, which is ruled tightly by its Communist Party, holds elections in which individuals are allowed to run for office freely and sometimes can even win against the official candidate. But these independents are not allowed to form an organization to coordinate their efforts, which prevents them from having an effective voice. The Chinese system is not a democracy because isolated individuals—individuals who cannot combine with others—cannot challenge the sole legal political organization, the Communist Party, in any effective way.

For a democracy to function effectively, therefore, it needs more than just elections. A true democracy allows those with competing points of view to present their ideas in a lively and effective way through the following principles and structures:

- competing political parties
- freedom of speech and association
- equal access of voters to the process of selecting public officials
- equal access to those officials once they are elected

These requirements—the principles of democracy—as they apply to the United States are a central focus of this book. The United States was the world's first modern democracy, and over the years, aspiring democracies have measured themselves against the U.S. system, treating it as a standard. The extent to which the principles of democracy are realized in countries of the world today varies greatly, however. How does the United States' democracy compare with that of other governments around the world? Of the 116 democracies shown in the map in Figure 1.1, Freedom House, an organization that researches and promotes democracy, places the United States, along with only 47 other countries, in the highest category of democracies that meet most fully the requirements of a democracy.

For the first two hundred years after the first modern democracy was established in the United States at the end of the eighteenth century, the spread of this form of government was gradual. In a sudden spurt starting in the mid-1970s, however, many countries shifted from nondemocratic forms of government to democracy. Democracies represented only 31 percent of the world's states in 1977, a figure that had remained essentially unchanged since the 1950s. By the mid-1990s, however, about 62 percent of the world's states had become democratic, with the sharpest jump in the number of democracies occurring between 1989 and 1995.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1990s, however, there has been essentially no growth in the number of democracies. It was still the case in 2018 that 62 percent of the countries in the world were democracies.

Most democracies are found among the more prosperous countries of the world. In fact, the average per capita income of democracies is almost twice that of non-democracies.<sup>6</sup> The reasons why this is so are not fully understood, but it may simply be that people find it easier to work out their differences peaceably when they are reasonably well-off economically. The United States has been one of the world's most prosperous countries for two centuries.<sup>7</sup> This has helped it to cement its democratic form of government even during trying times, such as the nineteenth-century Civil War, when that government was severely tested.

## THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY

The widespread adoption of democracy in the later twentieth century probably stems ultimately from a basic human need for respect. Even if democracy is imperfect as practiced, the aspiration toward a more democratic form of government implies that all people are of equal worth and, at least in principle, have a right to be heard. Certainly, this aspiration has been present throughout American history and has led to a perception, both among Americans and worldwide, that the United States is a moral leader of the world. Translating the aspiration into practice, however, presents obvious difficulties. Democracies face two difficulties in particular—the problem of ensuring majority rule and the problem of protecting minority rights.

**ENSURING MAJORITY RULE** Representative democracy embodies the principle of **majority rule**—the idea that 50 percent plus one of the people should be able to choose a majority of the elected officials in a country and thereby determine its direction. Aside from many questions about the mechanics of elections (which we will explore in greater depth in Chapter 8), the fact that representative democracy makes people equal only in their right to vote also limits majority rule. The vote is a powerful resource in democratic politics, but other resources that are unequally distributed—for example, money, education, and social position (being a newspaper editor, for instance)—give some citizens more access to decision making than others. To the extent that these other resources affect the decisions that elected officials make, 50 percent plus one of the votes may not be the determining factor. According to surveys, for instance, for most of the period since World War II, strong majorities in the United States have favored prayer in the schools and stricter control of firearms, yet neither practice has become national law.

**PROTECTING MINORITY RIGHTS** Even if majority rule always prevailed, democracies would still face a second challenge—protecting **minority rights**, the basic freedoms of smaller groups within the general population. These may be racial, ethnic, or religious groups or individuals whose opinions differ from those of the majority. For example, what if a majority wanted to revoke a minority group's basic human rights, such as the right to equal treatment by the government or the right to speak freely? The principle of majority rule would seem to validate this decision, but most people would agree that it would be the wrong thing to do. In a telling example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white majorities in the Southern states passed many laws pushing African American minorities into inferior, segregated schools and other public facilities and denying them the right to vote. Overcoming the preferences of these majorities did not occur until the 1950s and 1960s, and doing so took rulings from the Supreme Court as well as congressional and presidential action. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, majorities of voters in many states voted to bar same-sex marriage—yet another example of the tension between majority rule and minority aspirations.

**majority rule** The principle that 50 percent plus one of the people should be able to elect a majority of elected officials and thereby determine the direction of policy.

**minority rights** Basic human rights that are considered important to guarantee for minorities in a democracy.

When studying a democracy such as the United States, we need to examine how the country deals with these two basic problems: How (and to what degree) is majority rule ensured? And how are minority rights protected under majority rule? These two questions will figure prominently in the succeeding chapters of this book.

## REPUBLICS

A concept that is often contrasted with democracy—and sometimes confused with it—is the **republic**. In the study of politics in general, a *republic* is simply a country not ruled by a monarch. But in the study specifically of American politics, we add another layer of meaning to the term. As you will see in Chapter 2, as the original founders of the United States considered how to design the new democracy and write its constitution, they used the term to denote government by the people's elected representatives, who—though they are ultimately responsible to the people—rule primarily on the basis of their own intelligence and experience. So, for them, a republic was distinguished from direct democracy as well as from monarchy. We will use the term *republic* to mean an indirect democracy that particularly emphasizes insulation of its representatives and officials from direct popular pressure. In political rhetoric today, the term *republic* is often used by people who favor democracy but do not favor intense and direct popular involvement in democratic government.

## FUNCTIONS OF GOVERNMENT

As we have seen, in the division of labor required by indirect democracy, some people serve as the elected representatives of the citizens and rule on their behalf. These people are the government, and they make decisions that are binding for all people in the country. Since most people, all other things being equal, would prefer not to be bound by rules, our views of government and its functions are generally characterized by some ambivalence: On the one hand, we do not enjoy being ruled; on the other hand, the alternative would result in chaos.

What sorts of functions do governments perform? What sorts of decisions do we *want* to have the government make for us? As a first answer to these questions, consider the Preamble to the United States Constitution, in which the authors laid out their reasons for establishing a central government:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

This Preamble alludes to two basic kinds of services that cannot easily be accomplished without government, and their provision accounts for two functions of every government of the world. The first function, captured by the phrase “[to] insure domestic Tranquility,” is to provide basic security for people to live together and to deal with each other in financial transactions. The second function, exemplified by the phrase “[to] provide for the common defence,” is to provide certain services called *public goods*—among them national defense—that can only be provided effectively by a government.<sup>8</sup> In addition to providing these two basic kinds of services, governments can and do perform a range of additional functions, as expressed by the phrase “[to] promote the general Welfare.”

In other words, governments *have* to exist in order to provide a secure social and financial environment and public goods, but they can do other things as well. Governments often end up doing a variety of other things since, once a government exists, citizens often want it to perform additional services. Thus, government can shape the context of our lives in all sorts of ways. Let's look more closely at these functions of government.

## MAINTAINING ORDER AND SAFETY

Since the government is the sole entity with the right to use force and coercion to implement its choices, it is able to enact and enforce rules against crimes such as murder, burglary, and

**republic** An indirect democracy that particularly emphasizes insulation of its representatives and officials from direct popular pressure.



assault, thus ensuring our security. It can also provide a common currency for—and regulate—financial transactions and guarantee that contracts will be enforced, ensuring the security of our property. To ensure enforcement of the relevant laws, the government maintains agencies such as the police, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Treasury Department. In effect, the government provides the basic social and financial network within which people can carry on their lives securely, functioning in the society and in the economy. This is true of every government in the world.

## PROVIDING PUBLIC GOODS

A **public good** may sound general but is in fact a very specific term. Public goods are more than “goods for the public”; they are, precisely, benefits that cannot possibly be given to some people while being withheld from others.<sup>9</sup> Public goods include national defense, space exploration, basic medical research, and public health programs to control the spread of disease. It is physically impossible to prevent any member of the community from using these goods. For instance, the U.S. government cannot defend its entire country’s borders without also defending Phil Shively in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Most importantly, the use of public goods cannot be restricted to only those who have helped to pay for them. Thus, public goods are dogged by the problem of **free riders**, who reason that since they will obtain the good in any case, they can get away without paying for its cost: “If I don’t pay my share, the army will still be there, and I’ll get all the benefits of it. Why should I pay?” Everyone could reason like this, so if a public good such as defense were left to private corporations or to organizations accepting voluntary donations, it would end up inadequately financed and everyone would lose out.<sup>10</sup> That is where government comes in. Since a government has the right to use force to implement its choices, it can require people to pay taxes and then use that tax money to pay for the public good. Mandating shared payment of a public good eliminates free riders.

Let’s consider the case of public television, a public good that is largely funded by donations from viewers, not provided by the government in the United States and therefore suffers a serious free rider problem. Television signals that are broadcast on the air waves are a public good because no one in the community can physically be prevented from picking them up with a receiver, whether or not they have paid, so public television stations are



**Public goods, such as clean air and water, benefit everyone, not only the specific people who paid for them.**

**public good** Something that benefits all members of the community and that no one can possibly be prevented from using.

**free riders** Those people who take advantage of the fact that a public good cannot possibly be denied to anyone by refusing to pay their share of the cost of providing the public good.

faced with the problem of free riders. For this reason, every few months, the station's staff finds itself forced to interrupt their programming in the hopes of encouraging viewers to help defray the costs of running the station. They appeal to guilt: "Only one in ten of you who watch this station is a member; the rest of you are free riders." They appeal to acquisitiveness: "For the basic \$35 membership, we offer this lovely ceramic mug, embossed with the station's logo." Perhaps the most effective pitch occurred a few years ago in Minneapolis, Minnesota, when the station staff promised that if they reached their goal early, they would cut off the fund drive at that point and return to regular programming. Contributions flooded in!<sup>11</sup>

In short, through such actions as providing for the defense of the country, exploring space, protecting the environment, and developing public health programs such as immunization, the government is fulfilling its function of providing public goods. If the air quality is preserved, it is preserved for all of us. And so, preserving the air quality (a public good) raises the problem of free riders and is thus undertaken by government.

## PROMOTING THE GENERAL WELFARE

Beyond these two essential functions of providing a basic network of protective laws and security and providing public goods, however, government can also do more. Recall that in addition to establishing justice, ensuring domestic tranquility, and providing for the common defense (things only a government can do), the authors of the Constitution wanted the government to "promote the general Welfare." The general welfare can be promoted through various government services, and almost all governments do provide some benefits beyond the basic requirements. The American government performs each of the following services:

- providing infrastructure
- regulating the economy to ensure that it operates fairly
- providing support to people in vulnerable positions
- redistributing income to improve the lives of citizens with less wealth
- regulating behavior

**PROVIDING INFRASTRUCTURE** Many other services that people feel are important as a basis for the economy and society, such as education, highways, and parks, are not public goods; in principle, they could be provided only to those who were willing to pay for them and withheld from those who don't. For example, all education could be offered by private schools and all highways could be offered to users on a toll basis (essentially the way railroads are). However, these are basic and important services that most people think government should provide because they constitute the underlying infrastructure for everything else; certainly, in the United States, the government provides such services.

**REGULATING THE ECONOMY TO ENSURE THAT IT OPERATES FAIRLY** This function of government goes beyond maintaining order by enforcing contracts. As part of ensuring the fair regulation of the economy, the government regulates many financial transactions to make sure that everyone involved has enough information to make intelligent choices. The sale of stocks is regulated, for instance, to require companies offering stock to disclose full information so that those buying the stock know what they are getting. Drug companies must submit potential drugs to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to make sure they are safe before they are offered for sale.

**PROVIDING SUPPORT TO PEOPLE IN VULNERABLE POSITIONS** By providing money and services, the government can make sure that members of the society who are in an economically vulnerable position have reasonable support. The government provides support through the Social Security system to retirees, to children who have lost a parent, and to disabled people. The government also provides unemployment insurance, offers disaster relief, and in many other ways tries to help those who are either temporarily or permanently in a vulnerable position.



AFP Contributor / Getty Images

**When Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in 2017, the federal government was accused of not fulfilling its duty to provide disaster relief and thus contributing to the death toll of more than 3,000 Americans.**

**REDISTRIBUTING INCOME TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF CITIZENS WITH LESS WEALTH** Through the federal income tax system, and through the design of certain programs such as the pension system in Social Security, the government tries to lessen income inequalities in American society.

**REGULATING BEHAVIOR** Beyond the need to maintain public order, the government also passes laws to regulate people's behavior (examples include laws against obscenity, public nudity, and the use of various drugs) and uses its police to enforce those laws.

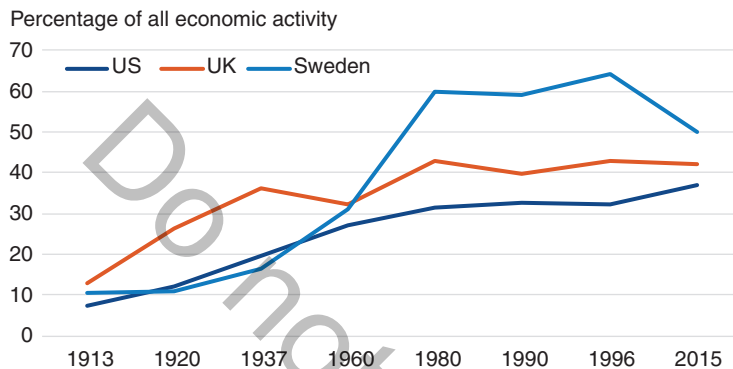
## CONTROVERSIES ABOUT GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONS

We put the discussion of government functions in the previous sections in order according to how much public consensus exists for government action in each. Few dispute that the government should maintain social and economic order, though of course there are often lively disputes over *how* the government does this. (No one disputes the need for police forces, for instance, but people often disagree about how the policing should be done.) Certain public goods, such as national defense and diplomacy, are similarly uncontroversial, at least in the sense that people agree that the government should provide these public goods. There is a good deal of consensus around the need for government to provide for infrastructure as well—especially for elements such as education and highways. However, as we go down the list of functions, there is less consensus for a government-regulated economy.

Furthermore, within any of the areas of government function, people often disagree about *how* active the government should be, even if they generally concur that the government should be involved to some extent. How much is the right amount to spend on national defense? And what about environmental protection? Although considered a public good, it is surrounded by controversy: Should the government take actions to reduce human contributions to the warming of the earth's atmosphere? And of course, in areas such as redistribution of income or regulation of behaviors, the extent and nature of government activity is also often quite controversial, leading to questions such as whether the government should eliminate the tax on inherited wealth (the estate tax or "death tax").

FIGURE 1.2

## Growth of Governmental Activity in the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Sweden



Government's expenditures as a percentage of all economic activity grew in all three countries, but less in the United States than in Sweden or Great Britain. Sources: Vito Tanzi and Ludger Schuknecht, *Public Spending in the 20th Century: A Global Perspective* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6; "General Government Spending," Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2018, <https://data.oecd.org/gga/general-government-spending.htm>

Governments around the world differ in how active they are. In general, the United States government provides fewer goods and services, and spends less on them, than most other wealthy countries. National and local governments accounted for 37 percent of all expenditures in the United States in 2015—evidence of a large and active government, it is true. But governments in the United Kingdom (also often called *Great Britain*) and Sweden account for more of their countries' expenditures—42 percent and 50 percent respectively.<sup>12</sup>

We see in Figure 1.2 that the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden all had relatively small government presences at the beginning of the twentieth century, but that their governments grew as a result of the two World Wars and the Depression in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1936, for instance, government spending in the United States accounted for only 16 percent of expenditures. The United States continues to have a smaller presence of government than the other two countries, however, despite its growth over several decades.

Governments also differ in how active they are in the different areas of government functioning. Although the United States spends more on

national defense than most other wealthy countries, many of these other countries spend much more than the United States on social services and on protecting the vulnerable. For instance, in 2016, only 2 percent of all government spending in Germany went to national defense, compared with 61 percent for social programs and health; the figures were very different for the United States: 8 percent for defense and only 46 percent for social programs and health.<sup>13</sup>

The proper scope of government and the choices it should make are always controversial. Differences in the size of the government's presence and in what sorts of functions and policies the government emphasizes are due largely to differences in what the people of the country value. We explore Americans' values in the next section.

## AMERICAN VALUES

People derive their values from the general culture they inherit from past generations and also from their personal experiences. We will deal with Americans' "political culture" in detail in Chapter 6. For our purposes here, we can note that the Europeans who first settled the thirteen original colonies, most of whom came from England, brought with them from their home country many ideas about how government should operate. These ideas—passed from generation to generation and gradually modified by the ideas of newer cultures and immigrant groups as well—have helped to shape the values of Americans today. Historical experiences have also helped to shape these values. As we will explore in further detail in this chapter, the original migration from Europe, the continuing lure of an open frontier for much of the nineteenth century, and the modification of our values by newer cultures and ethnic groups have profoundly influenced Americans' ideas about the proper role of government.

Four basic American values have played a prominent role in determining the extent of government's involvement in people's lives and what the government does:

1. fairness based on contributions
2. freedom and individualism
3. support for the rule of law
4. religion

Let us look at each of these values separately.

## FAIRNESS BASED ON CONTRIBUTIONS

Fairness—treating people in the way they deserve—is a universal value found in all societies. Societies differ, however, in what they see as the basis for determining what people deserve. In the United States, fairness is often interpreted as getting what one deserves on the basis of what one has accomplished or contributed. In many other countries, fairness may more likely be interpreted in terms of equality—that is, as getting the equal treatment one deserves based simply on being a member of the society.

In a recent survey, people in 52 countries were asked a series of questions, including the following:

Imagine two secretaries, of the same age, doing practically the same job. One finds out that the other earns considerably more than she does. The better paid secretary, however, is quicker, more efficient and more reliable at her job. In your opinion, is it fair or not fair that one secretary is paid more than the other?<sup>14</sup>

In almost all of the countries, a majority thought it was fair to pay the more efficient secretary the higher wage, but the size of the majority that believed this varied greatly. Fully 89 percent of Americans thought the difference in pay was fair—a higher percentage than in all but 4 of the 52 countries and a higher percentage than in any Western European country. Only 11 percent of Americans thought the difference was *unfair*, while about a quarter of the Italian and Spanish respondents felt it was unfair, as did about a third of the Indian and Brazilian respondents.

It's not that Americans don't believe strongly that they and others should be treated fairly—they do, as reflected by the public outcry over the government's decision to distribute bailout aid to banks during the financial crisis in 2009 after the banks made risky investments. But what these survey results demonstrate is that Americans base fairness on one's level of effort and one's contributions to society rather than on everyone being treated equally. Because of this view, government programs that are intended to help the vulnerable and make income distribution more equal tend to be controversial in the United States and usually face an uphill fight. When such proposals are made, arguments in favor of them tend to emphasize what the vulnerable or the poor have contributed through their own efforts rather than their neediness or the importance of treating everyone equally. Americans are much more likely to support programs for retired workers than for other at-risk populations, in large part because retired workers are thought to deserve support as a result of their earlier contributions.

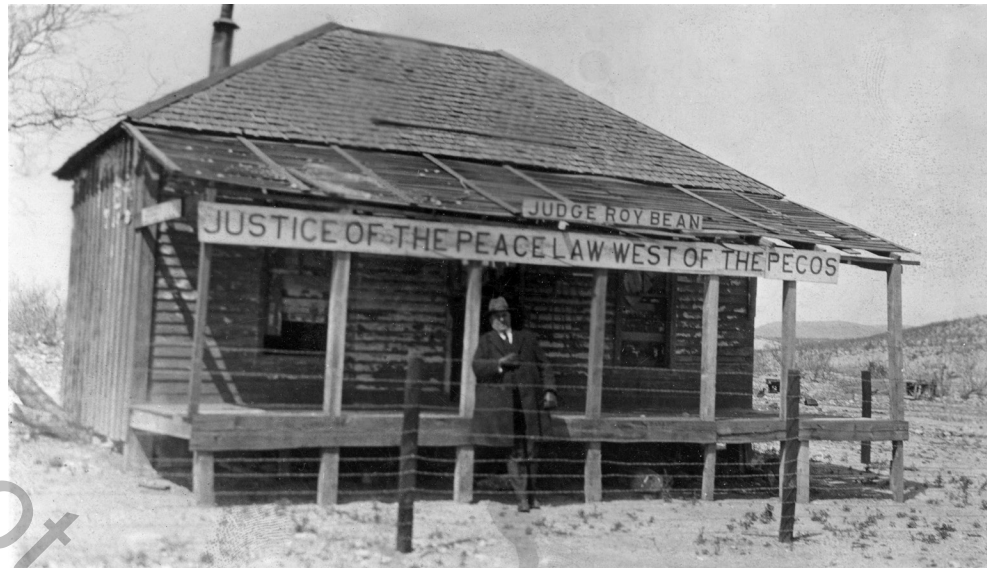
This is not to say that the definition of fairness as treating everyone equally or according to their need lacks any support at all. In another part of the survey cited earlier, almost half of Americans stated that they believe, in general, that incomes should be made more equal. But overall, there is more emphasis on fairness as equal reward for equal accomplishment than in most countries.

## FREEDOM AND INDIVIDUALISM

In addition to fairness, Americans also regard freedom and individualism as important values. **Individualism** is the belief that people should be able to rely on themselves and be free to make decisions and act freely, with as little governmental or other societal control as possible. We value highly those who think for themselves. In 2016, for example, Donald Trump presented himself in the presidential campaign as a blunt “straight talker” who was not bound by ordinary rules of politeness. When John F. Kennedy wrote a book titled *Profiles in Courage*, he featured public officials who had taken stands that went against their parties or the opinions of their constituents, doing instead what they thought was right. Generally, Americans have always liked rebels and nonconformists, those who “march to a different drummer” or “color outside the lines.”

The value of individualism has its roots in colonial times. Many of the early settlers from England and Scotland—Catholics in Maryland, Quakers in Pennsylvania, and Puritans in New England—had fled to the colonies to escape religious persecution and discrimination. Other colonists, such as convicted criminals and poor farmers, had emigrated to escape punishment

**individualism** The belief that people should have freedom to make decisions and act with as little government intervention or other control as possible.



The New York Historical Society / Getty Images

**The United States' status as a frontier society—and stories of the “Wild West” that made it back east—contributed to Americans' view of the nation as one that prized freedom and individualism.**

and to start over after having their land confiscated. On some level, all of these colonists had sought freedom from government control.

Over the last two centuries, many waves of immigrants—including but not limited to Asians, Eastern Europeans, and Latin Americans—arrived in this country with little except their self-sufficiency and their willingness to work. Their primary goal was to build good lives for themselves and their children. Their experience of relying on their own labor and on their own determination to succeed reinforced the traditional American values of individualism and self-reliance.

For many years, America was considered a “frontier society,” and this status encouraged the nation's disposition toward individualism.<sup>15</sup> Until the twentieth century, open land always beckoned. On the frontier, government ruled with a relatively loose hand and individuals had a good deal of independence. Indeed, this independence was one of the appeals of the frontier.

Finally, an important current in political thought that emerged around the time of the American Revolution further contributed to this affinity for individualism: classical liberalism. According to **classical liberalism**, a country's highest goal should be to allow all individuals in the nation to develop their intellectual and moral capacities to the fullest by making decisions for themselves rather than having decisions made for them by others. From this goal, it followed that the right of individuals to make their own decisions should be a basic principle of good societies and proper government. Classical liberalism is obviously different from what we call *liberalism* today. As we will see later in this chapter, today's liberalism argues for considerable central control in some areas such as the economy while arguing for individual freedom in others, such as abortion and free speech.

A major voice in classical liberalism at the time was John Locke; his writings influenced both the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution (see Chapter 2).<sup>16</sup> The Bill of Rights, as the first ten amendments of the Constitution are collectively called, enshrines a number of protections for individual choice against government control—protections for freedom of speech, religion, press, and free association as well as protections against abuse by the government in criminal prosecutions.

## SUPPORT FOR THE RULE OF LAW

The **rule of law**, another basic American value, is the principle that laws, rather than the whims or personal interests of officials, should determine the government's actions. The Preamble to the Constitution refers to the rule of law in the phrase “[to] establish Justice.” This principle

### classical liberalism

The doctrine that a society is good only to the extent that all of its members are able to develop their capacities to the fullest and that to encourage this result, government should intervene as little as possible in people's lives.

**rule of law** The idea that laws, rather than the whims or personal interests of officials, should determine the government's actions.

deals not with what the government should do but rather with how the government should comport itself. According to the rule of law, government should be guided by basic principles and should follow fair procedures, as summarized in the statement, “Ours should be a government of laws, not of men.”<sup>17</sup>

The rule of law embodies the idea that everyone should be treated the same way; thus, it is related to the value of fairness. It goes beyond simple fairness, however, in that it also maintains that careful procedures should be set up to limit what the government can do. Remember that the government is the one entity in a country with the right to use force to implement its decisions; the rule of law limits government so that it cannot abuse its power by treating people unfairly. For example, consider the many protections—some of which are stated in the Bill of Rights—that are designed to preserve the rights of accused persons in U.S. criminal trials. These include the right against unreasonable searches for evidence; the assumption that a defendant is considered innocent until proven guilty; and the right to not be held in prison for more than a short time without being charged with a crime, known as *habeas corpus*.

The Bill of Rights was included in the Constitution in order to guarantee Americans the same rights that English citizens had traditionally enjoyed. Thus, the United States established traditions of the rule of law earlier than most countries. It was not until after World War II, for instance, that France instituted the right of *habeas corpus* or the presumption of innocence. In general, the United Kingdom and its former colonies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and India established strong traditions of the rule of law earlier than continental European countries and their former colonies.

## RELIGION

Americans are unusually religious. In one study, 49 percent of Americans—a far greater percentage than in any other prosperous country in the world—indicated that God is very important in their lives. Twenty-two percent of Australians responded in kind, but very few did from Japan, Germany, Sweden, or other prosperous countries (see Figure 6.5).<sup>18</sup>

Moral values rooted in religion have figured strongly throughout U.S. history, influencing both conservatives and liberals. For example, Christian denominations were partially



Barbara Davidson / Los Angeles Times / Getty Images

**Americans are more religious than citizens of any other prosperous nation. Many regularly attend services at temples and churches, like these members of Potter's House Church in Dallas.**

responsible for the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement. Many churches also supported a powerful temperance movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; this movement led ultimately to a constitutional amendment banning the sale of alcoholic beverages (the Eighteenth Amendment, which was passed in 1920, before being repealed in 1933). The civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s drew strong support from both African American and white churches. Today, conflicts over abortion, same-sex marriage, proposals to ban pornography, and the teaching of creationism in public schools have strong moral/religious roots.

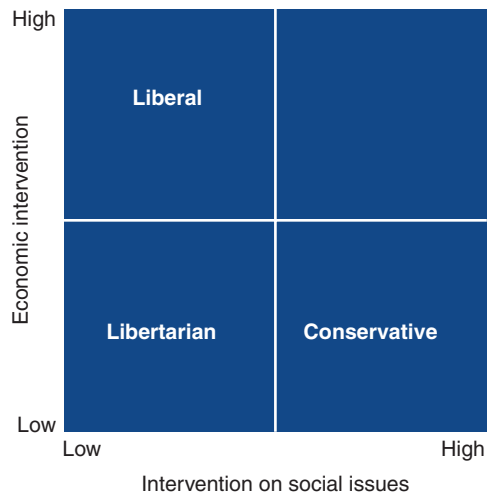
### VARIATIONS AND CONFLICTS IN VALUES

Fairness, individualism, belief in the rule of law, and religion are all basic American values, but this does not mean that every American holds these four values equally nor does it mean that every American views each of the values in the same way.

Sometimes values conflict with each other. Should the government set limits to executives' pay (fairness) or should they leave each executive free to earn whatever the market will bear (individualism)? Should homeowners have to build structures pleasing to their neighbors (fairness) or should they be free to build whatever they want, no matter how bizarre (individualism)? Should prayer be required in the schools (religion) despite the Constitution's ban on the government establishing a religion (rule of law)? Such conflicts between values form the underlying basis of American ideologies.

FIGURE 1.3

### Value Conflict and Ideology



We have divided the grid into four quadrants here for the sake of simplicity. In reality, both dimensions are gradients; one person can be located higher or lower than another or farther left or right, even though both are located in the same quadrant. Each dimension is a matter of degree. Where do you think you would fall on the grid?

**ideology** An interconnected set of ideas.

### AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES

An **ideology** is an interconnected set of ideas that forms and organizes our ideas and attitudes about politics. Our attitudes on gun control, on same-sex marriage, on appropriate levels of taxes, and on many other issues cluster and connect with each other. If we know whether certain individuals support gun control, for instance, that information may often help us to make an educated guess about whether they favor allowing same-sex marriage, though we would not be able to predict this perfectly. An ideology organizes our ideas and attitudes for us. It also adds emotional intensity to our views on issues, as our attitude on each issue is reinforced and strengthened for us by the issue's connection to the other attitudes in the ideological cluster.

In this chapter, we will present a brief overview of American ideologies. As indicated earlier, the four basic American values can sometimes conflict with one another. Not surprisingly, Americans' ideologies relate to different combinations of these basic values. Two particular lines of conflict between values form the primary basis of Americans' ideologies: the conflict between individualism and fairness and the conflict between individualism and moral beliefs.

The conflict between individualism and fairness, especially the broader interpretations of fairness, yields an economic left-right dimension or basis for ideology, with support for economic free choice at one end (the right) and support for government interventions (through regulations, taxes, and programs) to ensure economic fairness and equality at the other end (the left). Examples would include the dispute in 2017 over whether to provide tax cuts to people with large incomes and recurring disputes over whether to impose rules on banks to limit the fees they may charge customers.

The conflict between individualism and moral beliefs yields what is sometimes called a "social issues" dimension or basis for ideology, with support for free choice in such issues as abortion, sexually explicit entertainment, and drug or alcohol use at one end and support for government interventions to enforce moral values in such issues at the other. Moral issues do not only figure on the political right, of course. Those on the left have also sometimes favored



moral imperatives over individual freedom of choice, as in liberals' desire to regulate hate speech. Currently in the United States, however, a constellation of moral values on the right is a major factor defining the political landscape.

As you can see in Figure 1.3, when we put these two dimensions together, we have a grid of possible ideologies. Individual Americans' ideologies can be located on the grid, depending on how they feel about government intervention to ensure economic fairness and how they feel about government intervention to enforce policies based on religious views. For instance, a person who opposes intervention in either case would be located in the lower-left part of the grid (low on economic intervention and low on social intervention). The quadrants on the grid serve as the basis for describing the major American ideologies.

## CONSERVATISM

**Conservatism** is represented in the lower-right part of the grid. It combines a desire for government intervention to reinforce moral views such as support for prayer in schools and opposition to same-sex marriage with a desire *not* to have the government intervene in the economic realm to bring about fairness through regulation of business, taxes, and other policies. Conservatives argue that fairness in economic settings is better accomplished by allowing free markets to work without government intervention.

## LIBERALISM

**Liberalism** is represented in the upper-left part of the grid. It combines a desire for governmental intervention to reduce economic inequality and inequalities between groups (especially between the majority and minority groups) with a desire *not* to have the government intervene to enforce policies based on religious views by regulating personal behaviors. Thus, liberals tend to favor higher tax rates for the wealthy than for the middle class and the poor and programs and policies to ensure equal treatment of women, members of ethnic and racial minorities, and gays and lesbians but tend to oppose, for example, prayer in schools or government bans on pornography.

## OTHER IDEOLOGIES

**Libertarianism** opposes government intervention of any sort, favoring maximum individual freedom for people to make their own decisions, and so it falls in the lower-left part of the grid. It is a minor ideology in terms of its numbers of supporters (the Libertarian Party received only 3 percent of the votes in the 2016 presidential election), but it has played a more significant role in our political discourse than those numbers suggest. Ron Paul, a libertarian, ran fairly strongly in the Republican presidential primary elections in 2012, getting as much as 30 percent of the vote in some states; his appearances on college campuses, especially, drew large and lively crowds. His son, Rand Paul, also a libertarian, has served in the United States Senate since 2010 as a Republican.

The libertarian ideology is simple: On the economic issues dimension, libertarianism coincides with conservatism, opposing the use of government programs to promote economic equality, but on the social issues dimension, it coincides with liberalism, opposing government restrictions on personal behaviors. Libertarianism is in fact the survival of classical liberalism, discussed on page 14, and as such, is deeply rooted in the history of American thought.

The upper-right part of the grid, characterized by support for government intervention in both dimensions, is unlabeled because there is no well-organized American ideology that falls in that part of the grid. In many European and Latin American countries, this part of the grid is filled by Christian–Democratic ideology; for instance, Angela Merkel, the chancellor of Germany, heads a Christian–Democratic party (see this chapter's "Picture Yourself" feature for more on values and ideology in Germany). Christian Democrats favor government

**conservatism** In the United States, the ideology that supports government intervention on behalf of religious values but opposes intervention in the economic sphere.

**liberalism** In the United States, the ideology that opposes government intervention on behalf of religious values but supports intervention in the economic sphere to reduce inequality.

**libertarianism** In the United States, the ideology that opposes government intervention in any area of people's lives.



Particularly since the 2016 election, some Americans on the left are identifying themselves as democratic socialists, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who was elected to the House in 2018.

intervention in support of religious values and also favor governmental economic and regulatory intervention to ensure fairness.

This combination of positions has never caught on strongly in the United States. There are, of course, some Americans who fall into this part of the grid; they often describe themselves ideologically as economically liberal but culturally conservative. However, no single term captures this combination of positions, and no structured organizations, think tanks, or political parties represent it. It may be that such an ideology has had difficulty taking full hold in the United States because of Americans' strong predisposition to individualism.

Two ideologies that originated in Europe but never took a strong enough hold in the United States to become significant are socialism and fascism. Because some American political figures are occa-

sionally mislabeled as *socialist* or *fascist*, we will briefly introduce these ideologies here for the sake of clarification and to help you better understand how they are used in American political rhetoric.

**Socialism** developed out of conflicts between workers and employers in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—conflicts that were much more intense than similar conflicts in the United States. The socialist ideology at that time called for workers to take over the power of the state (either through elections or by revolution) and then use the state to control the economy by taking over and running all major industries. The end result was intended to be a society of equal citizens, with no economic or social distinctions among them. Socialism was a minor political force in the United States in the early twentieth century, reaching its high point in 1912 when its presidential candidate, Eugene V. Debs, received 6 percent of the vote nationally. Today, “socialist” parties in Europe have largely abandoned the goal of having governments take over industry but rather are democratic, free-market parties that favor policies to reduce economic inequalities. In the United States today, some politicians on the left, such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, use the term *democratic socialist* in this sense to describe themselves.

It has always been puzzling why there never was a large socialist party in the United States, given that throughout much of the twentieth century, socialism was a major political force in many other parts of the world. Perhaps the most succinct analysis was offered by Friedrich Engels, one of the founders of the international socialist movement, in a letter to an American friend. Engels attributed socialism's weakness in the United States to (1) the system of elections, which makes it harder to succeed with a new party than in most countries (we will look at this topic in detail in Chapter 8); (2) immigration and slavery, which had established a patchwork quilt of Irish, Germans, Czechs, African Americans, and others in which politics was dominated by disputes between ethnic groups rather than between workers and capitalists; and (3) the prosperity of the country, which gave workers a living standard better than anywhere else.<sup>19</sup>

**Fascism** was a nationalist, often racist ideology that flourished in Europe in the 1930s in the midst of the Great Depression and the devastation of World War I. Leaders such as Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy adopted a showy, militaristic style of politics centered on a single, charismatic leader (themselves). A credible fascist movement in the United States has never come about, although some white power movements have adopted many of the symbols of fascism, such as the lightning bolt or the Nazi swastika.

**socialism** An ideology that favors having the government take over most businesses and run them in the interest of social and economic equality.

**fascism** A nationalist, racist ideology of the 1930s that centered power on a single charismatic leader.

**comparison** Comparing aspects of a country's government and politics to those aspects in other countries to better understand their causes.

**historical analysis** Examining the way politics has developed over time in a country in order to understand how its development has helped to shape its current form.

## COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Our fundamental goal in writing this text is to help you understand how our particular form of democracy works and how it came to be. You may already know many facts about American politics—for example, about the separation of powers or the process by which a bill becomes a law. You will learn such facts from this book as well, but beyond learning what makes up American politics and government, you will also explore *causes* (what makes the U.S. system work as it does) and *effects* (what difference does that make, and why should we care?).

We chose to title our book *American Democracy in Context* because our main tool to help you understand American politics is to place it in a comparative and historical context. When we use **comparison**, we compare aspects of U.S. government and politics to those same aspects in the governments and politics of other countries. This comparative tool exposes us to possibilities beyond what we observe in the United States while offering insights into why various aspects of U.S. government and politics operate as they do. A second tool, **historical analysis**, allows us to investigate the roots and evolution of the U.S. system, allowing us to more knowledgeably evaluate how and why the U.S. system came to exist in its current form. The goal is to help you gain a more in-depth understanding of American democracy than you could acquire from a simple description of our politics.

As an example of how comparison and historical analysis may help us to understand American politics, consider the fact that Americans volunteer more for public purposes than people in many countries do (see Figure 1.4). In a survey of the citizens of 40 countries, U.S. citizens ranked near the top in volunteerism. When asked, for example, if they had volunteered to do charitable activities such as giving money or time or helping strangers in the last month, 62 percent of Americans responded in the affirmative.<sup>20</sup>

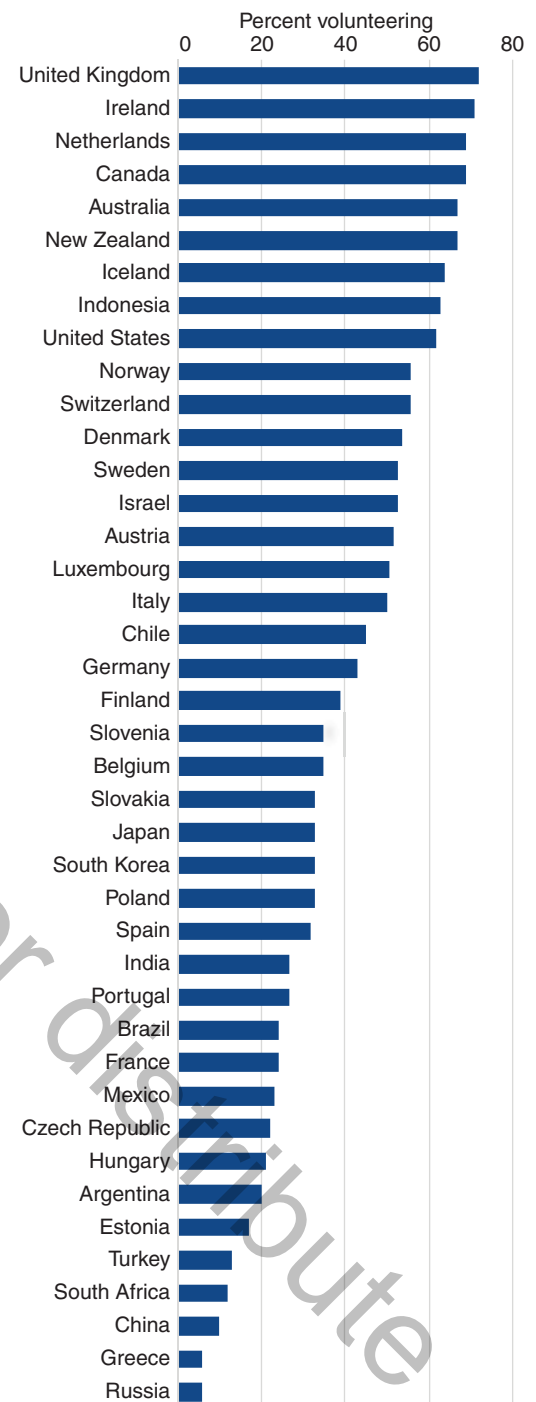
Why do Americans volunteer so much more readily than citizens of many other countries? Comparison may help us to some extent in answering this question. First of all, we notice from Figure 1.4 that in general, citizens of more prosperous countries tend to volunteer more than others. Of the top 10 countries in the figure, all but one are among the fifty most prosperous countries in the world; of the bottom countries, none are among the fifty most prosperous.<sup>21</sup> Of course, there are exceptions to this tendency. Indonesia is not a prosperous country and ranks just above the United States; and France and Japan, which *are* prosperous, rank low on the table. Nonetheless, the tendency is a strong one. We may hypothesize that in prosperous countries, people are secure enough in their own economic situations that they can more readily spare time or money to help others.

We also notice that six of the top ten countries share a common heritage as former parts of the British Empire: the United Kingdom and its former colonies (Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States). It seems likely that there is something in the culture all of these countries share that encourages helping others.

In addition to comparison, historical analysis may help us to understand why Americans volunteer so readily to help others. Volunteering has a long-established tradition in the United States. As early as 1832, Alexis de Tocqueville, a young French aristocrat who journeyed to the United States to study how the new democracy worked, commented on how willing Americans were to work voluntarily for the common good. American society at that time was made up mostly of farming communities with a great deal of social equality, in which neighbors helped each other more or less

FIGURE 1.4

### *Americans Volunteer at a High Rate*



*Sixty-two percent of Americans volunteered time, gave money, or helped strangers in a given month—more than the citizens of many other countries. In general, citizens of prosperous European and North American countries were more generous in this way than citizens of other countries. Why is this so?*

Source: “Panorama de la Société 2014,” OECD, 2014, 153.



PICTURE YOURSELF . . .

## As a German Citizen

As a German, how would your values compare with those of an American? In a survey conducted in 2006, both Americans and Germans were asked whether people should take more responsibility for themselves or whether the government should take more responsibility to see that everyone is provided for. The response gap was telling: Sixty-six percent of Germans thought that the government should take more responsibility while 41 percent of Americans agreed with this sentiment.<sup>a</sup> Why?

Classical liberalism, with its doctrine of giving individuals as much room for independent decision making as possible, never caught on as strongly in Germany as it did in the United Kingdom and its former colonies. As a result, as a German citizen, you are less suspicious of government activity and less anxious about wanting to preserve your own individual sphere of choice from government regulation. You are neither bothered by very detailed governmental supervision of people's lives nor by rules such as barring stores from opening on Sunday or requiring that all trash must be sorted into multiple categories.

Another value that is fairly distinctive comes from Germany's experience with Hitler and World War II in the 1930s and 1940s. Tired of tumult and defeat and knowing that many neighboring countries have blamed Germany for committing terrible crimes during that war, you are suspicious of military action. You are also wary of nationalism based in emotion, which was a hallmark of the Nazi regime.

This reluctance to pursue military options and suspicion of nationalism shows up in opinion surveys. Only 24 percent of you said you were "very proud" of your nationality compared with 56 percent of U.S.

citizens who were asked the same question. When asked whether you would be willing to fight for your country in the event of war, only 41 percent of you said "yes" compared with 57 percent of Americans.<sup>b</sup>

As you look across the Atlantic, you realize that though you have many things in common with the people of the United States, there are also differences, which sometimes condition the relations between your country and theirs. You find that Americans often do not understand why Germany will not contribute as much as the United States would like to common military efforts, for instance. But on the other hand, you yourself find it hard to understand why Americans are reluctant to be regulated by governments and international organizations in the cause of helping to slow down global warming.

### Questions to Consider

1. Free speech and other individual political rights are well protected in Germany, yet Germans are also very willing to allow the government to intervene in economic decisions. Is there any contradiction in this? Do you think support of economic intervention by the government makes it harder to ensure general freedom for people? Explain your response.
2. As noted in the discussion of ideologies, no well-organized political movement in the United States has ever supported high governmental intervention in *both* economic matters and social issues. (The upper-right quadrant of Figure 1.3 is empty, in other words.) In Germany, however, many religious citizens who want the government to reflect religious values in its policies also favor economic intervention. How might politics in the United States be different if that part of the political landscape were equally well populated?

<sup>a</sup>Inglehart, R., C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al., eds. 2014. World Values Survey: Round Six—Country-Pooled Datafile Version: [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp). Madrid: JD Systems Institute.

<sup>b</sup>Ibid.

as a matter of course. On the frontier, in fact, neighbors *had* to rely on each other, because the government had little presence there. The evolution of American society from these roots may have had a good deal to do with the high incidence of volunteering today.

These comparative and historical explanations work together to give us a richer understanding of volunteering in America than we could gain simply from an observation that Americans volunteer a lot.

## CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRACY

Does it matter that the United States is a democracy with a strong emphasis on individual self-reliance and freedom? This may seem a strange question to ask. It is hard to imagine the United States being anything else, and the word *democracy* so purrs with respectability that it is a little hard to take the question seriously. Nonetheless, it is worth raising the question. After all, relatively few countries in the world have been democracies consistently for even the last few decades. As we saw, fewer than a third of the world's countries were democracies in 1977.

What would be different about the United States if it were *not* a democracy? Though it is difficult to speculate about such a broad question, there are some things we can probably conclude from comparisons with other countries. First of all, the United States would probably be just as prosperous if it were not a democracy. Most analyses of democracy and economic growth have concluded that it does not make much difference to the prospects for economic growth whether a country is democratic or not.<sup>22</sup> And we can see from many examples, such as China or Singapore, that a country can grow and prosper even though it is not a democracy.

Though democracy is not the source of countries' prosperity, however, it does affect how the fruits of that prosperity are distributed. In general, democracies are better than non-democracies at responding to the broad needs of their people. This makes sense, since in a democracy, the government is accountable to all of the people. A review of the well-being of people in democracies and in non-democracies concluded that democratic governments' policies in health and other areas were sufficiently better than those of nondemocratic governments that people in democracies had life expectancies that were three or four years greater than in non-democracies.<sup>23</sup> We can assume from this that if the United States were not a democracy, various policies of the government would be significantly less helpful to the broad range of people in the country.

But there is much more to it than this. In country after country around the world in the 1970s and 1980s, as people established democracy in their countries, they did not do it to improve their living standard or their health but because of deep aspirations for human dignity. The basic appeal of democracy is the individual dignity it confers on each citizen by giving him or her a small share of the power of government, and the protection its rule of law offers against arbitrary acts by the government. These are the values behind the movement toward democracy in other countries in the twenty-first century. And as we have seen, they are values deeply rooted in the American culture. Probably the greatest difference democracy makes to Americans is that it fulfills those values.

### Critical Thinking Questions

1. In the introductory comparison of Singapore and the United States, we saw that Singapore is cleaner, has less crime, and enjoys a slightly higher average income than the United States, but Singapore does not allow open competition between opposing values in its limited democracy. Which do you think would be the better country to live in? Why?
2. We introduced the concept of *public goods* on page 9 and along with defense spending, we used the space program and basic medical research as examples of public goods. Why do the space program and basic medical research, for example, qualify as public goods?
3. Germans are less willing than Americans to sacrifice (pay taxes, accept a lower income) to help prevent environmental pollution.<sup>24</sup> And yet Germans are much more active in recycling than Americans; they divide their recycling into several different categories, and Germany has drastically reduced its production of garbage and trash. How might you explain this paradox?
4. Can you think of reasons why Americans might be unusually religious compared with people in other prosperous countries?

## Key Terms

citizen, 3  
classical liberalism, 14  
comparison, 19  
conservatism, 17  
democracy, 4  
direct democracy, 4  
fascism, 18  
free riders, 9

government, 3  
historical analysis, 19  
ideology, 16  
indirect democracy, 4  
individualism, 13  
liberalism, 17  
libertarianism, 17  
majority rule, 7

minority rights, 7  
politics, 2  
public good, 9  
republic, 8  
rule of law, 14  
socialism, 18



Visit [edge.sagepub.com/maltese](https://edge.sagepub.com/maltese) to help you accomplish your coursework goals in an easy-to-use learning environment.