

FOUNDATIONS

PART

I

Chapter 1	Introduction to the Enduring Democracy	1
Chapter 2	The Founding and the Constitution	23
Chapter 3	Federalism	47
Chapter 4	Civil Liberties	65
Chapter 5	Civil Rights, Equality, and Social Movements	91

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Do not copy, post, or distribute



The registration table inside the Brookline High School Schluntz Gymnasium awaits voters on election day.
Lane Turner/The Boston Globe via Getty Images

1

INTRODUCTION TO THE ENDURING DEMOCRACY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Analyze the 2020 presidential campaign in historical context.
- 1.2 Explain the philosophical underpinnings of the American political system through the exploration of important theories such as the “social contract” theory.
- 1.3 Assess the importance of the value of popular sovereignty and how that value is realized through “representative democracy” in the United States.
- 1.4 Define *political culture* and describe the unique combination of political beliefs and values that form the American political culture.
- 1.5 Assess the health of American democracy and evaluate whether the American system is in decline by applying a historical perspective on contemporary politics.

While Presidential elections are the most visible contests in American politics, midterm elections often set the tone for the successes and failures of the legislative process. Midterm elections are the elections for Congress that occur two years after every presidential election. While much of the history of midterm elections has allowed presidents to continue to work at their legislative agenda, recent midterm elections have not been so kind to presidents.

The results of the 2022 midterm elections marked an end to the “united government” that President Joe Biden and the Democratic majorities in Congress enjoyed since their taking office in January 2021. Biden, a Democrat, came into office with narrow Democratic majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate. These majorities allowed Biden to pass new legislation addressing pandemic relief, tax reform, climate change legislation, and relief for those holding college loan debt, among other things.

The 2022 midterm election contests, however, produced a slim majority for Republicans in the House of Representatives. It also produced a U.S. Senate locked in a virtual tie, with only the Vice President casting a deciding vote in the event of a tie. The GOP majority in the House is enough to halt legislative progress to the President’s agenda. Any new law must be passed by both houses of Congress before it is signed by the President.

A day after the 2022 midterm elections, President Biden quipped “I won’t compromise to work with the Republicans in Congress.” This sentiment, along with the strong feelings of the Republicans in Congress, is a formula for gridlock over the next two years. In this intensely divided partisan era, even a small majority by the opposition party may lead to legislative gridlock, as it has at a number of times in American history.

In this book, we explore how the patterns of history can inform us about present debates and controversies in American politics. We also discuss how many of these controversies are rooted in the great diversity of the American people. In all of this, we inquire into how the U.S. system of government, through all its recurring tensions, has endured.

MIDTERM ELECTIONS, HISTORY, DIVERSITY, AND AMERICAN POLITICS

The 2022 Midterm Election Results in Historical Context

The environment for legislative gridlock in 2023 and 2024 is not new. One does not need to look back too far in American history to see how midterm election results can produce gridlock in the legislative process.

The 2018 midterm elections marked the end of united government for the Republicans and President Donald Trump’s legislative agenda. The first two years of Trump’s term, beginning in January 2017, had GOP majorities in both houses of Congress – this allowed for major legislation to be

passed in a number of areas, including tax cuts and tax reform. Like the vast majority of midterm elections following the election of a new president, however, the opposition party got the better of the 2018 midterms, flipping the House of Representatives from Republican control to a Democratic majority, and effectively stopping the Trump-GOP agenda dead in its tracks. The remaining two years of the Trump presidency was characterized by gridlock and highly partisan charged debates.

Similarly, in 2010, the first set of midterm elections after President Obama took office resulted in significant Republican gains in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. With Democratic Party control of Congress during the first two years in office, Obama was able to win a number of legislative milestones, including the passage of Obamacare and new regulations on the financial industry. The remaining years of Obama's presidency after the 2010 midterms was characterized by GOP control of at least one house in Congress, and thus six long years of gridlock in government.

History Often Repeats Itself

The patterns of history provide a powerful tool for understanding American government today. In recent years, for example, the internet and social media have revolutionized American politics. In 2016 and in 2020, presidential candidate Donald Trump used Twitter daily to communicate with voters. In 2008 and 2012, presidential candidate Barack Obama used Facebook to build extensive volunteer networks and campaign donations to the tune of more than \$1 billion. These candidates utilized social networking to mobilize voters to their cause. Other politicians have tried to duplicate their use of social media; in the 2020 presidential contest, social media dominated the campaign process. Voters of all political persuasions use social media to connect with their favorite campaigns. Consider the possibilities: In 2020 Facebook subscribed 285 million users in the United States, and Twitter had 186 million users.¹ Not only is this a massive audience, but it is an active audience, as social networks allow users to trade and share information and opinions with their friends and families. In the past, political strategists were forced to rely on the paid TV spot as the primary way to communicate with voters. Today, however, there is a noticeable shift toward using social media to send messages, raise money, and mobilize voters. Why? A message from a friend is considered much more personal, powerful, and effective than an impersonal TV spot.

Of course, social network sites like Facebook are not the only type of breakthrough technology to revolutionize political campaigns. Barack Obama was the first candidate to win the presidency by making extensive use of social media; nearly a half-century earlier, John F. Kennedy pioneered the use of television to win the White House. When he ran for the presidency in 1960, TV was dramatically changing American society, just as social media are changing it today. As a relatively new medium with a mass audience in Kennedy's time, TV provided prospective voters with what no communications platform had offered ever before—the chance to see the candidates' campaign on a daily basis. Television audiences could tune in to watch TV spots, and they could see the candidates debate each other live in their own living rooms; voters saw the candidates in action. Kennedy's youth and enthusiasm made effective use of television commercials touting his candidacy. His ability to “out-charisma” Richard Nixon in the 1960 debates led to a surge in turnout and helped to pave the way for a Kennedy victory. Kennedy's use of this new medium provided a model for how presidents would interact with voters over the next four decades.

Although revolutionary, TV was not the first communications medium to transform political campaigns. Radio, which by 1932



John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon at one of their three presidential debates during the 1960 presidential campaign.

AGIP - Rue des Archives / Granger, NYC

had reached most U.S. households, enabled voters to listen to the candidates' voices instead of just reading their speeches or statements. Both President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) and President Herbert Hoover used radio addresses and advertising extensively during the 1932 campaign. Whereas Roosevelt's voice on the radio inspired confidence and enthusiasm for tackling the ills of the Great Depression, Hoover's logical and monotone monologue was far less effective. From that point forward, candidates could not just focus on the words that they used; they also had to excel in articulating those words with passion. FDR's use of radio eventually mobilized voters, particularly those who were most negatively affected by the economic doldrums of the Great Depression. After winning the 1932 election, FDR continued to use radio to personally connect with voters and inspire them through his "fire-side chats," which he broadcast for the next 12 years.

One hundred years earlier, yet another communications revolution occurred that had a lasting impact on political campaigns. By the 1830s, newspapers were changing in a number of ways. The invention of the "rotary press" in 1815 facilitated the mass production of affordable newspapers and eventually gave way to the so-called penny press. A decade later, the invention of the telegraph enabled penny-press papers to quickly produce stories on breaking news events. Further, the laying of railroads to all parts of the country to accommodate rapid westward expansion paved the way for mass distribution of newspapers. Americans gobbled up this new source of information, and Andrew Jackson used this medium to engage voters, bypass the political elite, and communicate his message of rugged individualism and "the rise of the common man" to help him capture the White House in the 1828 election. The newspaper, which became a common person's medium, enabled Jackson to distribute his message widely to an audience that was willing and eager to read what he had to say. Jackson's use of the newspaper was critical to his success, just as Obama's use of social media was critical to his own success. Never again would presidential political campaigns be targeted exclusively at political elites, thanks to Jackson's use of the penny press to effectively appeal to the masses.

This book explores the role of history as a guide to understanding contemporary American politics.

Debates Over Diversity in American Politics

As part of this book's exploration of our country's history, we also highlight the country's ongoing victories and struggles with the diversity in the American population. It is critical to highlight and understand the unique role of diversity in our evolving democracy. We take a broad view of diversity to examine how differences in various identity characteristics (such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality) can impact not only our place in society but also our opportunities to have a voice in American government. We hope to challenge you to think broadly on how your particular identity impacts your understanding of and participation in American politics.

Some people worry that the growing diversity in America introduces an essential dilemma into American politics, as it requires society and government to evolve and change. During the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaign, Donald Trump stirred up racial and religious tensions by speaking negatively about our nation's diversity, emphasizing the supposed dangers of the Latino and Muslim populations in the country. Throughout this book we highlight not only how our diversity has always been viewed as a potential challenge, but also how it has been seen as a source of our country's strength. In what may have been the first diversity dilemma the country faced, the U.S. government was forced to define who classified as a citizen for purposes of the U.S. Census population count. Even though our definition of a citizen was rather limited at the time of our country's founding, our understanding of the American people has slowly evolved. As an example of this evolution, consider changes that have been made to the U.S. Census. Since 1790, the U.S. government has implemented a nationwide census to count the population in the country every 10 years. This population information is used for a variety of reasons, including distribution of federal spending and planning for the growing population. The U.S. Census questionnaire has evolved considerably since 1790, often as a result of our changing understanding of diversity. The first census collected very rudimentary information on the racial makeup of the country—it was restricted to asking if the individual responding was white or owned slaves. The census racial categories have evolved; however, they are still limited to five basic categories,

including White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

It was not until 1970 that the U.S. Census began to ask respondents about their ethnicity: Initially, this was restricted to asking a subsample of respondents whether they had a Hispanic family origin. After 2000, the Census allowed respondents to choose more than one racial category. The most recent debate over census questions revolved around whether to include a question about citizenship. We are now challenged with understanding the true diversity of the U.S. population, which may require further Census revisions.

In this book, we examine the major topics and concepts in American government and politics. We attempt to answer sweeping questions about how American government works: How does policy get made? Who are the major players and institutions that make the laws? How do these players achieve their position? How do disputes get resolved? What is the role and power of the people? Throughout these discussions, we pay special attention to millennials and Generation Z, the contributions and challenges of diversity, and how we might better understand American government today by observing the patterns of history.

FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF GOVERNMENT

Government is the collection of public institutions in a nation that establish and enforce the rules by which the members of that nation must live. Even the most primitive of societies have found government to be necessary. Without government, society would be in a state of **anarchy**, a situation characterized by lawlessness and discord in the political system. Thomas Hobbes, a seventeenth-century British political philosopher, wrote that without government, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”² Government is necessary to make the rules by which citizens must abide, promoting order, stability, and protection for the society. It exists in part to resolve conflicts that naturally arise when people live in communities. Elaborating on the role of government, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an eighteenth-century French philosopher, posited that in fact a “social contract” exists.³ A **social contract** is an agreement people make with one another to form a government and abide by its rules and laws. In return, the government promises to protect the people’s rights and welfare and to promote their best interests.

A government’s **authority** over its citizens refers to the ability of public institutions and the officials within them to make laws, independent of the power to execute them. People obey authority out of respect, whereas they obey power out of fear. Numerous different forms of government with governing authority can be found around the nations of the world. One such form—the form that will receive extended attention throughout this book—is **democracy**, defined as a government in which the people, either directly or through elected representatives, hold power and authority. The word *democracy* is derived from the Greek *demos kratos*, meaning “rule by the people.”

By contrast, an **oligarchy** is a form of government in which a small exclusive class, which may or may not attempt to rule on behalf of the people as a whole, holds supreme power. In a **theocracy**, a particular religion or faith plays a dominant role in the government; Iran is just one example of a theocratic nation in the world today. A **monarchy** is a form of government in which one person, usually a member of a royal family or a royal designate, exercises supreme authority. The monarch may be a king or queen, such as Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain. In the past, monarchies were quite common; today they are rarely practiced in the absolute sense. Although the United Kingdom continues to pay homage to its royalty, true political power rests in the Parliament, the members of which are elected by the people.

Many of the nations in the world today have an **authoritarian** form of government in which one political party, group, or person maintains such complete control over the nation that it may refuse to recognize, and may even choose to suppress, all other political parties and interests. North Korea under Kim Jong-un is an authoritarian government in existence today, as is Russia under the dictatorial control of Vladimir Putin.

An important characteristic of any government, whether democratic or not, is its power to exercise authority over people. **Power** is the capacity to get individuals to do something that they may not

otherwise do, such as pay taxes, stop for red lights, or submit to a search before boarding an airplane. Without power, a government would find it very difficult to enforce rules. The sustained power of any government largely rests on its legitimacy. **Legitimacy** is the extent to which the people (or the “governed”) afford the government the authority and right to exercise power. The more that people subscribe to the goals of a government, and the greater the degree to which that government guarantees the people’s welfare (e.g., by supporting a strong economy or providing protection from foreign enemies), the higher will be the government’s level of legitimacy. When the governed grant a high level of legitimacy to their government, the government wields its power to make and enforce rules more successfully.

AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Politics is defined as the way in which the institutions of government are organized to make laws, rules, and policies, and how those institutions are influenced. More than 80 years ago, political scientist Harold Lasswell proposed a brief but very useful definition of politics as “who gets what, when and how.”⁴ In American politics, the “who” includes actors within and outside the formal government, such as citizens, elected officials, interest groups, and state and local governments. The “what” are the decisions the government makes and take the form of what government funds, the way it raises revenue, and the policies it produces and enforces. The “when” relates to setting priorities about what government does. The concerns and issues that government addresses differ in importance, and issues of greater importance tend to be addressed more quickly. Finally, the “how” refers to the way in which the government goes about its work, based on the political institutions that exist and the formal and informal procedures and rules that define the governing process. In describing American politics, this book provides answers to Lasswell’s “Who gets what, when and how?”

Government in the United States is especially complex. It is organized into multiple layers (national, state, and local) and contains many governing units, as shown in Table 1.1. It encompasses a number of political institutions that share power—the executive (the president), the legislature (Congress), and the judiciary (the courts)—and it provides countless methods for individuals and groups to influence the decisions made by those institutions. In this book, we examine this complex organization of American government, describe the political institutions that exercise power, and explore the varied ways that people and groups exert influence. As we sort through this complexity of American government, we explain how and why the American political system has been able to endure the conflicts,

TABLE 1.1 ■ **Governments in the United States** The government of the United States might be more correctly described as a system of governments. In addition to the federal government, there are 50 state governments and thousands of local governments. The 2012 U.S. Census Bureau’s *Census of Governments* listed these totals for the number of governments operating throughout the nation.

Government	Number
Federal	1
State	50
County	3,013
Municipal	19,522
School district	13,051
Township/town	16,364
Special district	37,203
Total	89,004

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

both internal and external, that it has faced and currently faces. We attempt to show how the American government is uniquely designed to stand up to its many challenges.

The strength and stability of the U.S. government are grounded in the high level of legitimacy it maintains with the American public. Americans may disagree vehemently with public officials, but rarely do they question their claim to authority. The framers of the U.S. Constitution were keenly aware of the importance of the legitimacy of the system.

They knew that if the government was to withstand the test of time, it must serve the people well. These ideas about legitimacy drew largely on the theories of seventeenth-century British political philosopher John Locke (1632–1704).⁵ Locke proposed that people are born with certain *natural rights*, which derive from **natural law**, the rules of conduct inherent in the relationship among human beings and thus more fundamental than any law that a governing authority might make. Government cannot violate these natural rights, which include life, liberty, and property. Therefore, government, or human law, must be based on the “consent of the governed.” That is, citizens are responsible for choosing their government and its leaders. This theory loomed large in the mind of Thomas Jefferson as he drafted the Declaration of Independence to justify the American colonies’ split with the British government: “All men . . . are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights . . . [and] whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it.” A government maintains legitimacy as long as the governed are served well and as long as government respects the natural rights of individuals.

Drawing on this philosophy, the framers drafted a Constitution that created a political system able to manage the inevitable conflicts that occur in any society. Mindful of Thomas Hobbes’s notion that the essence of government is to manage naturally occurring conflicts, the framers designed a government that encourages conflict and competition rather than attempting to repress it. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, the U.S. Constitution includes a number of mechanisms that allow naturally occurring conflict to play out in as productive a manner as possible. Mechanisms are also in place to resolve conflicts and arrive at consensus on issues. Those who disagree and come up on the short side of political battles are guaranteed rights and liberties nonetheless. Further, the rules by which conflicts are settled are predicated on fairness and proper procedures.

The significance of what the framers of the Constitution accomplished cannot be overstated. They not only addressed the short-term problems challenging the new nation; they also drafted a blueprint for how government should go about dealing with problems and conflicts into the future. The U.S. Constitution has served as the cornerstone of an American political system that routinely attempts to tackle some of the thorniest problems imaginable. In Chapter 2 of this book, we examine the enduring principles and processes outlined in the Constitution.

The Constitution provides a way for the American government to navigate through the many problems and conflicts that have faced the nation, including severe economic depressions, two world wars, nuclear confrontations with the former Soviet Union, and persisting questions of equality. Through all these difficulties, the American government has endured. The foresight of the framers to create a Constitution that possesses the flexibility to adapt to changing times has served as a basis for the enduring democracy of the United States.

The preamble to the U.S. Constitution perhaps best summarizes the broad goals of American 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.

It is no accident that the first three words of the Constitution are “We the People.” With this phrase, the framers acknowledged that the ultimate source of power rests with the people, a concept known as **popular sovereignty**. The U.S. Constitution provided for a form of **representative democracy**, under which regular elections are held to allow voters to choose those who govern on their behalf. In this sense, individual citizens do not directly make policies, rules, and other governing decisions (that system of government is known as a **direct democracy**). Rather, representative democracy, also

referred to as *indirect democracy* or a *republican* form of government, rests on the notion that consent of the governed is achieved through free, open, and regular elections of those who are given the responsibility of governing.

An important source of the legitimacy of the U.S. government is the nation's commitment to representative democracy, which features the notion of majority rule. Majorities (more than 50 percent of the voters) and pluralities (the leading vote getters, whether or not they constitute absolute majorities) choose the winners of election contests, and so officeholders take their positions on the basis of whom most voters prefer. If officeholders fall from public favor, they may be removed in subsequent elections.

THEN & NOW

When the Popular Vote and the Electoral Vote Diverge

The Electoral College offers a unique, if sometimes controversial, system for selecting America's chief executive every four years. The Electoral College and the popular vote have produced different results in five presidential elections in American history, the most recent example occurring in 2016.

Then

In 1888, the presidential race featured a contentious face-off between the Republican challenger, Benjamin Harrison, and the Democratic incumbent, President Grover Cleveland. On November 6 of that year, voters cast their ballots and the national vote tally provided nearly 100,000 more votes to Cleveland. However, the result in the Electoral College, which decides presidential elections, gave Harrison nearly 60 more electoral votes and thus a resounding victory. This electoral vote/popular vote divergence came only 12 years after the same event occurred in the course of Rutherford B. Hayes's victory over Samuel Tilden in 1876. That time, too, the Republican rode to victory, courtesy of the Electoral College.

Now

In 2016, at the end of the presidential contest, voters cast their ballots for Democrat Hillary Clinton, Republican Donald Trump, or one of two third-party candidates. After the election, the popular vote favored Clinton by about 2,800,000. Still, Donald Trump managed to muster 67 more electoral votes than Clinton to put him over the top in the Electoral College count. This electoral vote/popular vote divergence came only 16 years after the same anomaly resulted in George W. Bush's victory over Al Gore.

For Critical Thinking and Discussion

1. Do you think that the U.S. Constitution should be amended to eliminate the Electoral College and replace it with the national popular vote as the method of selecting a president? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such an amendment?
2. In two of the past five elections, the popular vote winner was not the electoral vote winner. In both instances (2000 and 2016) the GOP candidate lost the popular vote but won the electoral vote and thus the election. Why do you think the electoral vote benefits the GOP candidate?

Legitimacy is also enhanced by broad public support for the specific purposes of government stated in the preamble to the Constitution: to “insure domestic tranquility” (produce laws that maintain a peaceful and organized approach to living in the nation), to “provide for the common defense” (establish and maintain a military force to protect the nation from outside threats), to “promote the general welfare” (develop domestic policy programs to promote the welfare of the people), and to “secure the blessings of liberty” (guarantee basic freedoms, such as the rights of free expression and the ownership of property, even to those in the minority). Though people may have different opinions on how to achieve these broad goals, few in the United States would disagree with the ideals as stated in the

abstract, or with the broad outlines of our republican form of government. Problems arise when public officials stray so far from these goals that their actions are deemed illegitimate by a near, if not absolute, majority. Yet the political system as a whole has been able to maintain its legitimacy, even under such trying circumstances, because it has been flexible enough to eventually rid itself of those ineffective actors, whether through elections, impeachment, or some other means. The relatively high degree of legitimacy that is maintained in the United States has helped the American government persist under the U.S. Constitution through good times and bad since 1789.

AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Political culture refers to the core values about the role of government and its operations and institutions that are widely held among citizens in a society. Political culture defines the essence of how a society thinks politically. It is transmitted from one generation to the next and thus has an enduring influence on the politics of a nation. Every nation has a political culture, and the United States is no exception.

Whereas common ancestry characterizes the core of the political culture of many other nations, the United States has no common ancestry. Most other nations around the world, such as France, Britain, China, and Japan, are bound by a common birth lineage that serves to define the cultural uniqueness of the nation. For example, the Russian people share common political values and beliefs as part of their ancestors' historical experiences with czars and then later with the communist regime. Britain, despite being a democracy, retains a monarchy as a symbolic gesture toward its historical antecedents. In many nations rich with such common ethnic traditions, these routines often serve to underscore the political culture of the nation.

The United States has no such common ancestry to help define its political culture. As seen in Table 1.2, Elazar presented a popular description of American political culture. Its land was first occupied by many different Native American tribes and then settled by people from many different parts of the world. Most of the immigrants who settled the colonies were seeking a better life from the political or religious persecution they experienced in their native countries, or they were seeking improved economic opportunities for themselves and their families. As America continued to grow through the centuries, it attracted immigrants from around the world, eager to find a better life. These circumstances had a profound influence on the core values that have become engrained in the American political culture. The ideas generated by democratic political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke also significantly contributed to American political culture. These ideas were used by the founders to justify the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, and they continue to underlie American political culture today.

TABLE 1.2 ■ Daniel Elazar's Typology of American Political Culture

Many observers of American politics have used different approaches and typologies to describe American political culture. The late political scientist Daniel Elazar described three competing political subcultures, which he believed differentiated American political culture from that found in any other country in the world. According to Elazar, different subcultures can be found in different geographic areas and sometimes within a single area. For example, he described the political subculture in Texas as part traditionalistic (as manifested in the long history of one-party dominance in state politics) and part individualistic (as seen in the state government's commitment to support for private business and its opposition to big government).

Subculture	Description
Individualistic	Is skeptical of authority, keeps government's role limited, and celebrates the United States' general reliance on the marketplace
Moralistic	Has faith in the American government's capacity to advance the public interest and encourages citizens to participate in the noble cause of politics
Traditionalistic	Maintains a more ambivalent attitude toward both government and the marketplace, believing that politicians must come from society's elite, whereas ordinary citizens are free to stand on the sidelines

Source: Adapted from Daniel J. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966).

The circumstances surrounding America's first and current immigrants, as well as the great ideas generated by Enlightenment philosophers, form the core set of values that define the American political culture. One of these core values is **majority rule**. From its earliest times, the American nation has been committed to the notion that the “will of the people” ought to guide public policy, thus underscoring the importance of popular sovereignty in the thinking of the founders. Majority rule is the way in which popular sovereignty is actually exercised. Rarely will all of the people agree all of the time, and so it is what the majority of people prefer that generally guides decision-making. Early local governments, such as town governments in some of the New England colonies, relied on town meetings, where all citizens were invited to attend, discuss, and vote, to make governmental decisions. Elections for most local and state offices, and elections for the U.S. Congress, are all based on the idea that those who make and enforce laws are duly elected by majorities. A more recent aspect of U.S. commitment to majority rule is its heavy reliance on public opinion polling as a gauge for assessing the performance of elected leaders and to ensure that leaders respect public preferences for certain policy positions.

Although the preferences of the majority rule the day, another core value in the American political culture is minority rights. Those in the minority enjoy certain rights and liberties that cannot be taken away by government. The idea of the natural law (e.g., that people are “endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights” that government cannot deny) is an important corollary to majority rule. The rights to speak freely, to choose a religion, or to decide not to practice religion at all are among the many liberties that are protected by the U.S. Bill of Rights and are widely endorsed by the American public.

These rights are intended to inspire debate on issues, guarantee religious freedoms, and afford due process rights to those accused of crimes. The American political culture places a high value on individual liberty. The fact that many immigrants came to this country for the promise of greater freedom adds further credence to this proposition. Certainly, there are some terrible black marks in American history that belie this claim. Among them are the perpetuation of slavery in the country up until the Civil War, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and the treatment of early 1960s civil rights protesters in the South. Still, many Americans today view their nation as the world's “garden” of freedom and liberty, even if it has come to this status only slowly and sometimes with reluctance during its more than two centuries of existence.

Another core value in American political culture is the idea of **limited government**. Americans have generally supported the idea expressed by Thomas Jefferson that “the government that governs least governs best.” From the days of the American Revolution, the colonists believed that the corruptive power of King George III and the British Parliament led to unfair treatment of the colonies. Suspicion of the government and those with power is firmly rooted in the psyche of American political culture. The “watchdog” function of the press, the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances among political institutions, and the rather negative connotation of the word *politics* all reflect an appreciation for limits and checks on those with authority. Corresponding to the value of limited government is the notion that communities and the private sector should take a role in helping fellow citizens. Problems that may be solved without government should be solved that way. The French journalist Alexis de Tocqueville observed this tradition when he visited the United States in the early 1800s and



Latina journalist and PBS senior correspondent Maria Hinojosa.

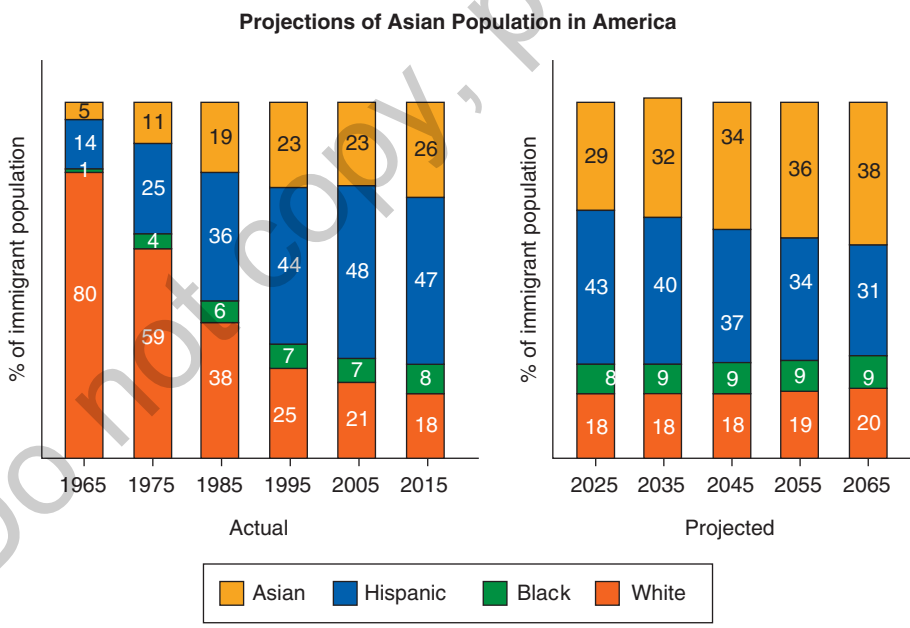
Mike Coppola / Staff / Getty Images Entertainment

credited the success of the American political system in part to citizens’ strong interest in community and helping one another apart from government.⁶ Because the United States has no common ancestral or cultural bloodline, American political culture recognizes the value and strength derived from the diversity of its population—another important core value. At the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor is inscribed a poem by Emma Lazarus that includes the phrase “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Until the U.S. government adopted a restrictive immigration policy in the early 1920s, those huddled masses arrived in waves from different parts of the world, as the United States became the chosen destination for those seeking a better life. Joining freed Black men and women who were originally brought here against their will were legions of Italians, Irish, Germans, and other immigrants from Europe and elsewhere. This surge in immigration occurred from 1880 through 1920, as immigrants left the economic and political strife of Europe seeking jobs and opportunities in America.

One of the most profound population developments in the recent history of the United States has been the skyrocketing growth of the nation’s Hispanic population. The Latino populations have expanded from what was once a small, regionally concentrated subgroup of fewer than 6 million in 1960 to a now widely dispersed population of more than 50 million (or 16 percent of the nation’s population) today. The recent explosion of immigrants from Latin America is largely a product of the difficult economic and social conditions they face in their home countries, as well as the opportunity for a better life they believe is possible in the United States.

As shown in Figure 1.1, the Pew Research Center projects that this modern immigration wave will drive U.S. population growth and change at least through 2065. The projections also include a growing Asian American foreign-born population that will even surpass Hispanics as the country’s largest immigrant group by 2055. Such a massive swelling in the ranks of Hispanics and Asian Americans has the potential to create major political change in America.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Asians Projected to Become the Largest Immigrant Group in the United States by 2055



Source: “Asians Projected to Become Largest Immigrant Group, Surpassing Hispanics,” *Pew Research Center*, Washington, DC, September 23, 2015, <https://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065/> ph_2 015-09-28_immigration-through-2065-05/.

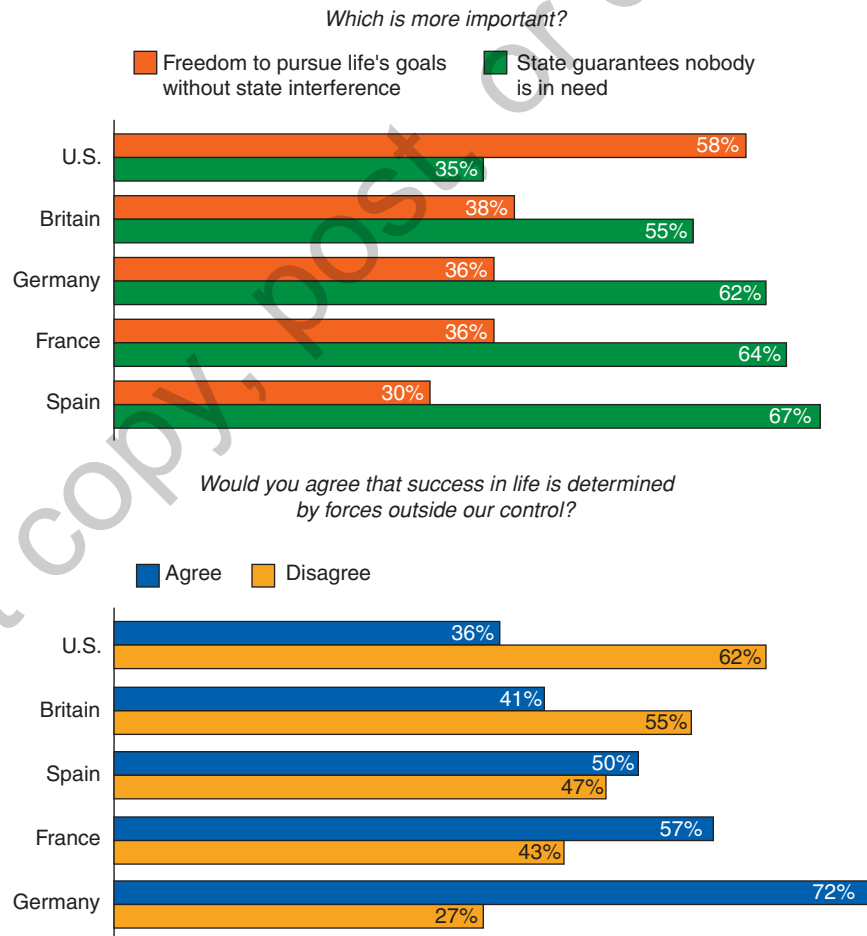
Note: Pew Research Center estimates for 1965–2015 based on adjusted census data; Pew Research Center projections for 2025–2065.

Note: Whites, Blacks, and Asians include only single-race non-Hispanics. Asians include Pacific Islanders. Hispanics are of any race. Other races shown but not labeled.

This population growth has transformed the United States to one of the most racially and ethnically diverse nations in the world. Integrating these many people into a united nation has not been easy; in fact, resistance to the notion of a “melting pot” has been common. The nation has been wracked at times with racial and ethnic strife to a degree that more homogeneous countries can more easily avoid. Government officials occasionally exacerbate these tensions by promoting policies that discriminate against various groups, including Native Americans, Black Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. No stranger to ethnic and racial tensions himself, German dictator Adolf Hitler calculated that the diversity of the United States would eventually hamper its resistance against Germany’s totalitarian aggression; in fact, American soldiers of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and religions fought in World War II. Much to Hitler’s chagrin, U.S. diversity proved to be a source of strength rather than weakness. Indeed, many Americans today believe that the heterogeneity of our society enhances the quality of our culture and helps guarantee the fairness of the government.

Americans also generally subscribe to the notion that individuals are primarily responsible for their lot in life—a value referred to as **individualism**. The seeds of this value were sown hundreds of years ago with the Puritans and their commitment to a strong work ethic that stressed that “what one sows determines what one reaps.” In other words, hard work and intelligence should be rewarded. Although

FIGURE 1.2 ■ Individualism as a Value in the United States Compared to Other Democracies



Source: “5 ways Americans and Europeans are different,” *Pew Research Center*, Washington, DC, April 19, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/19/5-ways-americans-and-europeans-are-different/>.

Source: A Pew Global Survey shows that Americans are more likely than their European counterparts to believe that “it is more important to pursue life’s goals without government interference” and to disagree with the statement “success in life is determined by forces outside our control.”

the U.S. government has assumed some responsibility to provide a safety net for citizens who suffer economically, the American political culture, through its primary reliance on a capitalist economic system, free markets, and individual effort, is one that promotes individual initiative and responsibility. Figure 1.2 depicts the heightened importance of the value of individualism in the American political culture, compared to other European democracies.

The value of individualism promotes another core value—equality of opportunity, or the idea that the role of government is to set the stage for individuals to achieve on their own and that everyone should be given the same opportunity to achieve success. Indeed, America has been an attractive place for highly motivated individuals from around the world to immigrate so that they might have a fair chance of achieving personal success. Many immigrants today, particularly from Asia and Latin America, are attracted to the United States for the opportunities to achieve individual success.

The United States has long set itself apart from those nations whose histories include traditions of a rigid class system of privileged aristocracies and oligarchies and peasants with few or no rights or freedoms. In the United States, there is no formal recognition of a class system; nor is there a tradition of royalty, nobility, or monarchy. Indeed, Article I of the Constitution specifically prohibits both the federal government and the state governments from granting any title of nobility upon its citizens. Instead, American political culture values the so-called Horatio Alger myth. Alger was a popular writer in the late 1800s whose characters came from impoverished backgrounds but through pluck, determination, and hard work achieved huge success. Although this idealistic rags-to-riches notion often ignores the many harsh economic disparities that exist in the United States, it remains central to the American political culture. The stories of Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln exemplified this road to success, as do the more recent examples of Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden, both of whom came from less-than-privileged circumstances to win the nation's highest political office and become leaders of the free world. Perhaps it is because of these success stories that so many Americans believe that they have boundless opportunities to better their lot on the basis of diligence and hard work.

These core values provide a window into American political culture. To be sure, there is plenty of room for disagreement as to how these values might be applied to specific situations, which we address in Chapter 10. In addition, these values are often in conflict. At the heart of the debate over affirmative action, for example, lies the value conflict pitting individualism against equality of opportunity. Those who oppose affirmative action in hiring claim that individuals should be evaluated exclusively based on who they are and what they can do rather than on their gender, race, or other demographic characteristic. Those supporting affirmative action claim that historical discrimination has led to a current job market that provides unequal opportunities for certain groups, such as racial minorities and women. Although these values do not always solve problems and policy debates, they do lay the groundwork for how American politics goes about settling problems and debating issues.

IS AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IN DECLINE?

The old saying that “those who ignore the problems of the past are destined to repeat them” holds as true in American politics as it does in any other context. Certainly, new issues and problems may arise, requiring innovative new thinking to address them. But many other difficulties the United States faces can be effectively addressed by casting an eye on the distant or not-so-distant past. A historical view can help place modern dilemmas in proper perspective.

The Case for Decline

Some recent observers of American politics have suggested that the American political system is in decline. Are we currently witnessing a deterioration of democracy in the United States? Is the American political system in jeopardy? Are the problems that the American system of government faces today beyond repair? To try to answer these questions, let's first look at the factors some cite as contemporary indicators of the decline of American democracy.

1. **The decline of the United States as an economic superpower?** The growth of the national economy from the Industrial Revolution through the post-World War II era established the United States as the preeminent fiscal power in the world for much of the twentieth century. This fiscal strength enabled the United States to establish the dollar as the benchmark unit of currency for the world, defeat the Soviet Union in the Cold War, build a military capability vastly superior to that of other nations, and provide the leadership that brought democracy to many other nations. However, the significant growth of the Chinese economy over the past decade, coupled with the exploding U.S. national debt (and the willingness of China to underwrite much of that debt), has raised serious questions about the future of U.S. dominance over the world's economy. Concerns over the economic rise of China and the decline of the United States are summarized in a recent study by the Congressional Research Service: "The emergence of China as a major economic superpower has raised concern among many U.S. policymakers . . . that China will overtake the United States as the world's largest trade economy in a few years and the world's largest economy within the next two decades. In this context, China's rise is viewed as America's relative decline."⁷⁷ This report offers evidence of a decline in economic power citing projections of U.S. and Chinese gross domestic product (GDP).
2. **The death of capitalism?** The collapse of some of the largest financial institutions in the United States in 2008 and the subsequent "Great Recession" have raised questions about the viability of the free market system in contemporary society. In large part, the financial industry's drive in the 1990s and 2000s to capitalize on rising real estate markets drove financial institutions to rely on increasingly risky lending practices. Risky loans were bundled and sold off to investors in the form of real estate securities. (These practices were depicted in the award-winning movie *The Big Short*.) Multibillion-dollar financial institutions, such as Citibank, Morgan Stanley, Lehman Brothers, Countrywide Mortgage, and AIG, among many others, found themselves in the red at the exact same time that the real estate market collapsed, thus freezing credit in the United States. The stock market tumbled, and the U.S. government needed to bail out many of the largest financial institutions just to keep the nation's financial system from collapse. The frantic drive for profits among the largest of



Senator Bernie Sanders, a member of the Socialist Party, campaigns for the Democratic Party's nomination in 2020. He has been a harsh critic of capitalism.

KAMIL KRZACZYNSKI / Contributor / AFP / Getty Images

these companies was identified as the source of economic ills not only in the United States but around the world. Greed, inspired by capitalism, seemed to be the culprit of the world's economic woes, thus leading to questions about the viability of the free market system in the modern age. The failure of markets during the Great Recession contributed to the popular presidential campaign of Democratic socialist Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020. More recently, corporations have been the subject of a great deal of criticism and blame for the spike in inflation. A number of U.S. senators agree with Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA): “Now, you might think inflation would also be bad for companies too. After all, an increase in the costs of doing business would likely eat into a company’s bottom line. But that’s not happening. In fact, the CEOs of some of the biggest companies have been bragging to their investors that inflation has created a terrific opportunity for them to boost profits.”⁸

3. **Policy paralysis caused by partisan gridlock?** Relations between the two major parties tend to ebb and flow with changing political moods and circumstances. Still, cross-party relations between Republicans and Democrats seemed to have reached such a low in the current era that policy-making all but ceases to function. In recent years, whichever party has carried the White House has been forced to brace for a Senate opposition that uses the filibuster freely and with few limitations to impose a supermajority requirement of 60 senators for all legislative enactments. Many other bills can never even get out of committee. Meanwhile, in the House of Representatives, the president’s opposition has ruled with an iron hand, rendering matters that had in the past proven perfunctory (such as the routine raising of the nation’s debt ceiling) into a knockdown, drag-out fight between the two parties in Congress. The prospect of a government shutdown often looms over every budget fight, and in December 2018–January 2019 partisan tensions did in fact lead to the longest shutdown of many federal government functions in the nation’s history. Party-line votes in Congress on most major legislative initiatives indicate a lack of any common ground whatsoever. Tensions between the Democrat-controlled House and President Trump in 2020 and 2021 led to two impeachments of the then-chief executive. Further, the very narrow majorities of the Democrats in both the House and Senate along with solid Republican opposition prevented President Biden from accomplishing much of his “Build Back Better” agenda in 2021 and 2022.
4. **Has money ruined American politics?** “Big money” now dominates American elections, in the form of contributions from those who seek to influence future officials, personal expenditures from candidates themselves, and general expenditures by political parties. The Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) seemed to cement the role that big money plays in determining election outcomes, paving the way for independent-expenditure political action committees (often called super-PACs) to accept unlimited contributions from individuals, unions, and corporations for the purpose of making so-called independent expenditures on behalf of candidates; it thus enabled wealthy individuals to dominate the process. In the year following *Citizens United*, just 22 donors provided the money for half of the \$67 million funded by super-PACs! In some instances, anonymous outside groups poured millions of dollars into the process. Others were willing to stand up and be counted: consider that billionaire Sheldon Adelson alone kept Newt Gingrich’s struggling presidential campaign afloat in 2012 with his donation of \$10 million to a pro-Gingrich super PAC. With a handful of individuals responsible for a large percentage of the donations in these campaigns, the corruptive influence of money appears to have reached new, dangerous heights.

But Do These Problems Really Signify a Decline?

If we reexamine some of the criticisms of contemporary American politics with the benefit of historical perspective, we may reach far different conclusions about whether American democracy is now in a state of decline.

1. The United States will remain an economic superpower. Challenges to U.S. fiscal dominance, such as the current challenge of China, are nothing new. Forty years ago, for example, many policy-makers expressed similar concerns about the imminent decline of U.S. economic power. At that time, the concern was focused not on China but on Japan. The Japanese economy flourished in the decades after World War II. A latecomer to modernization, Japan was able to avoid the pitfalls of industrialization experienced by the United States and other advanced democracies prior to World War II. Once converted to a free market system after the war, Japan's economy took off quickly. By the 1970s, Japan had the world's second largest economy and appeared to be closing in on the United States. Gross domestic product (GDP) in Japan grew from \$8 billion in 1955, to \$32 billion in 1965, to \$148 billion in 1975, to \$323 billion in 1985. By 1990, Japan's per capita GDP exceeded per capita GDP in the United States. The sharp upward trajectory alarmed many U.S. policy-makers, who felt that Japan's rise would ultimately derail the U.S. dominance of world fiscal policy. Yet today Japan offers no significant threat to the economic power of the United States. The rapid rise of Japan's economy left it unable to effectively deal with a recessionary period of any length. Consequently, the dire predictions of the U.S. economic fall to Japan were never realized. Furthermore, by 2016 China's economy was already showing signs of slower growth, leading economists to recognize the likely continued dominance of the United States well into the twenty-first century.⁹ To put the economic power of the United States in international perspective, consider this ranking of national GDP in 2022:

2. Capitalism is not dead. The Great Recession of 2008 and the events that led up to it certainly do not mark the first time that speculation in free markets led to economic catastrophe. A panic in 1837 led to stymied economic growth for more than three years, a severe recession in 1873 retracted growth for six years, and an economic panic in 1893 set off a series of bank failures. A stock market crash in 1929 produced the decade-long "Great Depression." These and many other economic downturns in U.S. history, aggravated by speculation and overly exuberant investors, have led to extremely tough economic times. But the ills of the free market have never limited the ability of capitalism to provide the medicine for recovery, and then some. Panics, recessions, and depressions have always been corrected by bull markets, opportunities, and resurgences. Capitalism has been declared dead many times in U.S. history. The approach of each economic downturn was accompanied by claims that the U.S. experiment with a free market system had finally failed. In fact, the free

TABLE 1.3 ■ GDP of the 10 Largest National Economies

1.	United States (GDP: 20.49 trillion)
2.	China (GDP: 13.4 trillion)
3.	Japan: (GDP: 4.97 trillion)
4.	Germany: (GDP: 4.00 trillion)
5.	United Kingdom: (GDP: 2.83 trillion)
6.	France: (GDP: 2.78 trillion)
7.	India: (GDP: 2.72 trillion)
8.	Italy: (GDP: 2.07 trillion)
9.	Brazil: (GDP: 1.87 trillion)
10.	Canada: (GDP: 1.71 trillion)

Source: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-by-gdp>.

markets operate in natural cycles of growth and retraction. Just as the free market system was declared dead at earlier times in American history, so, too, were many claiming that the Great Recession of 2008 was the last nail in the coffin of American capitalism. However, just as the cyclical nature of free market growth calmed the fears of the skeptics before, so, too, has the recent growth of the U.S. stock market and decline in unemployment quieted the naysayers once again.

3. **The polarization of the two major political parties has not paralyzed the lawmaking process.** The political parties' recent polarization is hardly unprecedented: At various times in history (e.g., during the Civil War, the New Deal) the parties have stood in stark contrast on nearly all the major issues of the time. Some democratic theorists argue that a marked differentiation between the two parties may actually contribute to democracy under a "responsive theory of democracy": the two parties disagree on the issues and then allow the public to express its opinion through elections. Despite all the talk of polarization, the Congress passed (and Presidents Trump and Biden have signed) a number of new laws, including a vast tax cut bill in 2017, and three multitrillion dollar spending bills in 2020 and 2021 to address the negative economic impact of the pandemic. In fact, the 116th Congress (which began January 3, 2019 and ended January 3, 2021) enacted 344 new laws.¹⁰ And in early 2022, overwhelming majorities of Democrats and Republicans alike joined together to pass a large aid package to aid Ukraine in defense against Russia's invasion. Thus, while the two major parties continue to grow further apart on numerous issues, the government continues to find enough common ground to pass legislation.
4. **The influence of money does not spell the end of American politics.** American elections have always been dominated by individuals with immense power and influence. For much of this nation's history, political machines all but controlled the nomination process and wielded heavy influence on politicians who benefitted from their respective handouts and other forms of largesse. Whether it was Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall in New York City, the Thomas Pendergast political machine in Missouri, or the Daley machine in Chicago, power has always been wielded by a relatively few, elite individuals. The recent dominance of money in politics has shifted the source of power from those machines to the extremely wealthy, but that may actually represent a positive development of sorts, as both parties have enjoyed their share of big donors and fundraising prowess in recent years. Moreover, well-financed campaigns like Governor Jeb Bush's unsuccessful bid for the White House in 2016 prove that money can only go so far without the right messenger and the right message. Those who think money corrupts politics might want to consider these caveats, as well as the far less attractive alternative that used to mark the elections process.

FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Courting the Youth Vote

Candidates and political parties often try to increase turnout as a means of enhancing their prospects in an election. However, numerous nonpartisan organizations also engage in special efforts to encourage the so-called youth vote in particular. These organizations may target young voters primarily for two reasons: (1) young voters represent the future of American democracy, and (2) youth turnout has tended to be lower than turnout among older Americans. In the 2016 presidential election, less than half of eligible voters ages 18 to 29 voted, leaving that group well behind turnout rates of the electorate as a whole (60 percent). In contrast, half of the youth turned out to vote in the 2020 presidential election, which was an 11 point increase from 2016.¹¹



A student at the University of Tennessee, votes in the 2020 presidential election.

Troy Stolt / Chattanooga Times Free Press via AP

Among the many organizations that run programs to encourage young voters to exercise their voting rights are the following:

1. Rock the Vote, which claims to have registered more than 5 million new voters in recent presidential elections (see rockthevote.org);
2. CIRACLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement), which studies the voting behavior of young people (see www.civicyouth.org); and
3. YouthVote.org, a website that provides a plethora of information to help young people learn how to register to vote and why it is important to do so.

For Critical Thinking and Discussion

1. Why do you think college-age students turn out in relatively lower numbers compared to older voters?
2. How effectively have the candidates in 2020 addressed issues that are important to college students?

History does not literally repeat itself. The specific people, circumstances, and events certainly change. But history can help us identify patterns, recurring problems, and trends in how the American political system functions and resolves conflicts. The preceding discussion of some of the contemporary arguments for why American democracy may be in a state of decline helps us frame current conditions. In doing so, we may gain a greater understanding of the challenges facing the nation today. Certainly, many contemporary challenges are no less daunting than problems the nation has encountered over the past two centuries. Throughout this book, a historical perspective on contemporary problems offers a sense of how the past might help us understand politics today.

SUMMARY

1.1 Midterm Elections, History, Diversity, and American Politics

- No event in American politics receives the level of attention that a presidential election elicits. The 2020 campaign was highly partisan, but many past campaigns were no stranger to divisive partisan battles.
- The patterns of history provide a powerful tool for understanding American politics today.

1.2 Forms and Functions of Government

- The development of the American political system is grounded in the philosophy of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that government is necessary and that it exists for the purpose of protecting the people that it serves. The “social contract” theory states that natural law gives people certain unalienable rights that government cannot take away and that the people give government authority to rule, but the people can withdraw that authority if government does not serve the people’s interests.
- Democracy may be distinguished from other forms of government in that it is a form of government in which the people, either directly or through elected representatives, hold power and authority.

1.3 American Government and Politics

- Democracy includes at its core the idea of popular sovereignty. The United States practices a form of democracy known as “representative democracy,” where the people indirectly rule by electing leaders who are responsible for making and carrying out policies and laws.

1.4 American Political Culture

- The political culture in America is reflected in the Constitution and the way in which the political system deals with and decides political debates. Among the core values guiding the American political culture are majority rule, liberty, limited government, diversity, individualism, and equality of economic opportunity.

1.5 Is American Democracy in Decline?

- Although the current American government has been in place for more than 200 years, questions have been raised about whether this political system is in a state of decline. Lower voter turnout, confusing election outcomes, negativity, polarization in politics, and the influence of money in policy outcomes have been offered as evidence of a decline. However, a review of historical patterns in American politics suggests that these seemingly contemporary problems are chronic, and the American political system has effectively dealt with these and many other problems in the past.
- Viewing American government from a historical perspective may enrich our understanding of how the political system works. History can help us identify patterns, recurring problems, and trends in how the American political system functions and resolves conflicts. Many contemporary challenges are no more significant than problems the nation has encountered over the past two centuries.

KEY TERMS

anarchy (p. 7)
 authoritarian (p. 7)
 authority (p. 7)
 democracy (p. 7)
 direct democracy (p. 9)
 government (p. 7)
 individualism (p. 14)
 legitimacy (p. 8)
 limited government (p. 12)
 majority rule (p. 12)

monarchy (p. 7)
 natural law (p. 9)
 oligarchy (p. 7)
 political culture (p. 11)
 politics (p. 8)
 popular sovereignty (p. 9)
 power (p. 7)
 representative democracy (p. 9)
 social contract (p. 7)
 theocracy (p. 7)

Do not copy, post, or distribute