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In Your Own Words

After you've read this chapter, you will be able to

1.1 Identify the broad concepts that relate to politics.
1.2 Describe the role that politics plays in determining how power and resources, including control of information, are distributed in a society.
1.3 Compare how power is distributed between citizens and government in different economic and political systems.
1.4 Explain the historical origins of American democracy and the ways that the available media controlled the political narrative.
1.5 Describe the enduring tension in the United States between self-interested human nature and public-spirited government and the way that has been shaped in a mediated world.
1.6 Apply the five steps of critical thinking to this book's themes of power and citizenship in American politics.

POLITICS: WHO GETS WHAT, AND HOW?

What’s at Stake . . . in “Hashtag Activism”?

THE LAST THING THEY WANTED to do was become famous. Not this way, not now. But when seventeen of their classmates and teachers were murdered on February 14, 2018, by a disturbed former student, the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, decided to make some noise.

They had seen this movie before. There had been mass shootings. Ever since they were little they had practiced what to do if someone showed up with a gun in their classrooms. There was even an armed guard on their campus. And still, it happened again. So they knew the ritual that would follow.

Every time the United States experiences a mass shooting, a grimly familiar routine follows. First there is unrelenting press coverage—of the dead, of the bereaved, of the shooter. Then those who lost loved ones make impassioned calls for more gun control, and those who oppose gun control make equally
impassioned declarations that we should not politicize tragedy, that it is too soon to talk about it. There are funerals. The president (usually) makes a speech. Then the press moves on to the next big news item and only the grieving are left to testify before Congress, create foundations in the names of their loved ones, and implore people not to forget. Lather, rinse, repeat.

But the MSD students knew the drill and were media savvy enough to figure out how to hack it. They were ready. Some, in the drama club, comfortable on stage; some, school journalists, eloquent and at ease with words; others, bright, articulate, privileged to attend a school with an embarrassment of extracurricular activities that had prepared them for their futures. Smart enough to know that their moment in the spotlight would be brief, they were determined to make it count.

The shooting was on a Wednesday. Cameron Kasky was so angry he took to Facebook, first to announce that he and his brother were safe and then to vent. “I just want people to understand what happened and understand that doing nothing will lead to nothing. Why is that so hard to grasp?” His social media posts caught the eye of CNN, which asked him to write an op-ed piece on Thursday, which led to television appearances. It became apparent to Kasky that his words were helping to shape the story of what had happened and what it meant. “People are listening and people care,” Kasky wrote. “They’re reporting the right things.”

To capitalize on that fickle national attention before it turned away, Kasky and several of his friends met that night to plan a social media campaign. By midnight they had a hashtag, #NeverAgain, social media accounts, and a message for politicians: legislate better background checks on gun buyers, or we will vote you out.

Meanwhile, MSD student Jaclyn Corin took to her own social media accounts to express her grief and anger at the loss of her friends. She, a girl who had never been political, also began to strategize. With the help of Florida Democratic congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, she planned a bus trip for one hundred students to Tallahassee to lobby state lawmakers.

By Friday, Corin and Kasky had joined forces, and on Saturday they added David Hogg, a student journalist who had conducted interviews while they were under fire, Sarah Chadwick, already famous for her angry, grief-filled tweets, and Emma González, whose speech at a local rally went viral. On Sunday they hit the morning talk shows to proclaim that the Never Again movement was planning the first March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C., on March 24.

Two weeks later (forever in the typical media cycle), the kids were still making news. Boycotts were organized to put pressure on companies doing business with the National Rifle Association (NRA), which has repeatedly blocked background checks. A National School Walkout was planned for the one-month anniversary of the shooting. Thousands of students across the nation participated. Famous people donated large sums to help fund the March 24 March for Our Lives. As Dahlia Lithwick wrote in Slate, “These teens have—by most objective measures—used social media to change the conversation around guns and gun control in America.”

The March for Our Lives, when it happened, defied expectations. Huge crowds assembled not just in Washington but in eight hundred places around the world. The only adults who appeared on the D.C. stage were entertainers. The Parkland kids, knowing they had created a unique platform, had invited other kids whose lives had been touched by gun violence. Yolanda King, the nine-year-old granddaughter of Martin Luther King, confidently stood before tens of thousands to lead the crowd in a call and response:

Spread the word.
Have you heard?
All across the nation.
We
Are going to be
A great generation.

The event highlight was not words, eloquent as many of them were, but silence—four minutes and twenty-six seconds of uneasy, suspenseful silence as Emma González stood like a sculpture, tears tracking down her face, so that the crowd would experience the duration of the shooting that ended seventeen of her friends’ and teachers’ lives.

Just like the 2017 and 2018 Women’s Marches, which brought out millions of pink-hatted women marching for human rights around the world; like Black Lives Matter, founded in 2013 to protest the unwarranted deaths of black men at the hands of police; like Occupy Wall Street, a 2011 movement to protest the unequal distribution of wealth in the United States; and like the It Gets Better Project, which works to convince LGBTQ youths that life does get better after the high school years, #NeverAgain was fueled and spread by social media.

Many older people know their way around the Internet, but #NeverAgain was the first mass movement planned and executed by digital natives, people who have never not known the world of digital media, for whom navigating digital terrain is second nature. It’s not clear what the generation will be called by history. Gen Z is so far the term of preference. Generational divides are blurry, and few social scientists agree where the dividing lines fall. But the post-millennial generation—those born since the mid-1990s or thereabouts—has an amazing political skill set to use if, like the Parkland students, they choose to do so. They have the ability, as Lithwick said, to “change the conversation,” or to create a powerful political narrative that they can disseminate and that helps level the playing field with powerful opponents like the NRA.

No movement can create change or defeat an opponent if it is only hashtag activism. Eventually, you have to put your vote where your # is. What is especially remarkable about the Never Again movement is that it emphasizes not just marching but voting. March for Our Life rallies throughout the summer of
In fact, since the military draft ended in 1973, young people have been notoriously uninvolved in politics, often seeing it as irrelevant to their lives and the things they really care about. Knowing that young people pay little attention and tend not to vote in large numbers, politicians feel free to ignore their concerns, reinforcing their cynicism and apathy. Young people have turned out in larger numbers since the 2008 election of Barack Obama, however, and the Never Again movement promises to energize even more.

The American founders weren’t crazy about the idea of mass movements, political demonstrations, or even political parties, but they did value political engagement and they knew that democracies needed care and attention in order to survive. In 1787, when Benjamin Franklin was asked by a woman what he and other founders of the Constitution had created, he replied, “A republic, madam, if you can keep it.” Today, many commentators worry that we are not “keeping the republic” and that, as new generations who find politics a turn-off become disaffected adults, the system will start to unravel. As one writer says, “a nation that hates politics will not long thrive as a democracy.”

Yet protesters like Cameron Kasky, Emma González, David Hogg, and Yolanda King sound as committed to democracy as Benjamin Franklin could have wished, even though their efforts are not focused solely on voting or traditional methods of political engagement. Is a nation of these young activists a nation in trouble, or can movements begun via technology that Franklin could not have imagined help to keep the republic? What, exactly, is at stake in #hashtag activism—what one writer called a “netroots outcry” to follow an online call to political action? We return to this question after we learn more about the meaning of politics and the difference it makes in our lives. ❖

INTRODUCTION

HAVE you got grand ambitions for your life? Do you want to found an Internet start-up and sell it for millions, be the investment banker that funds the project, achieve a powerful position in business, gain influence in high places, and spend money to make things happen? Perhaps you would like to make a difference in the world, heal the sick, fight for peace, feed the poor. Maybe you want a “normal” life when you can travel the world, learning languages and immersing yourself in new cultures and working abroad. Or maybe what you want from life is a good education; a well-paying job; a healthy family; a comfortable home; and a safe, prosperous, contented existence. Think politics has nothing to do with any of those things? Think again.

All the things that make those goals attainable—a strong national defense, good relations with other countries, student loans, economic prosperity, favorable mortgage rates, secure streets and neighborhoods, cheap and efficient public transportation, affordable health care, and family leave protections—are influenced by or are the products of politics. Yet, if you pay attention to the news, politics may seem like one long and crazy reality show: eternal bickering and finger-pointing by public servants who seem more interested in gaining power over their ideological opponents than actually solving our collective problems. Even in the midst of a crisis as big as the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians fought to prioritize their own interests in legislation meant to save the public from the worst effects of the disease and ultimately failed to protect the American people in a timely way. Increasingly, it appears that political actors with the big bucks have more influence over the process than those of us with normal-sized bank accounts. Public service, which we would like to think of as a noble activity, can take on all the worst characteristics of the business world, where we expect people to be greedy and self-interested. Can this America really be
Aristotle said that we are political animals, and political animals over two thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher and influence in society. A peaceful means to determine who gets power and resources in society, and that a major resource is control of the narrative, or story, that defines each contestant. There is not enough of all that power and influence to go around, so inevitably politics produces winners and losers. Much of the reason it can look so ugly is that people fight desperately to be the former and to create and perpetuate narratives that celebrate their wins and put the best face possible on their losses. It can get pretty confusing for the average observer.

As we will see, it is the beauty of a democracy that all the people, including everyday people like us, get to fight for what they want. Not everyone can win, of course, and many never come close. There is no denying that some people bring resources to the process that give them an edge, and that the rules give advantages to some groups of people over others. But as the What’s at Stake…? shows, what makes living today so different from previous eras is that we all have some access to the multiple channels of information through which battles over political narratives take place. The people who pay attention, who learn the rules and how to use those communication channels effectively, can increase their chances of getting what they want, whether it is restrictions on ownership of assault weapons, a lower personal tax bill, greater pollution controls, a more aggressive foreign policy, safer streets, a better-educated population, or more public parks. If they become very skilled citizens, they can even begin to change the rules so that people like them have more control of the rules and narratives and a greater chance to end up winners in the high-stakes game we call politics.

The government our founders created for us gives us a remarkable playing field on which to engage in that game. Like any other politicians, the designers of the American system were caught up in the struggle to create a narrative that justified their claim to power and resources, and in the desire to write laws that would maximize the chances that they, and people like them, would be winners in the new system. Nonetheless, they crafted a government impressive for its ability to generate compromise and stability, and also for its potential to realize freedom and prosperity for its citizens.

In Your Own Words
Identify the broad concepts that relate to politics.

WHAT IS POLITICS?

A peaceful means to determine who gets power and influence in society

Over two thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle said that we are political animals, and political animals we seem destined to remain. The truth is that politics is a fundamental and complex human activity. In some ways it is our capacity to be political—to cooperate, bargain, and compromise—that helps distinguish us from all the other animals out there. Politics may have its baser moments, but it also allows us to reach more exalted heights than we could ever achieve alone, from dedicating a new public library or building a national highway system, to curing deadly diseases or exploring the stars.

Since this book is about politics, in all its glory as well as its disgrace, we need to begin with a clear understanding of the word. One of the most famous definitions, put forth by the well-known late political scientist Harold Lasswell, is still one of the best, and we use it to frame our discussion throughout this book. Lasswell defined politics as “who gets what and how.” Politics is a way of determining, without recourse to violence, who gets power and resources in society, and how they get them. Power is the ability to get other people to do what you want them to do. The resources in question here might be government jobs, tax revenues, laws that help you get your way, or public policies that work to your advantage. A major political resource that helps people to gain and maintain power is the ability to control the media, not just the press and television but also the multiple channels created by companies like Google, Facebook, and Apple through which people get information about politics and that may actually affect the information we get. These days we live in a world of so many complex information networks that sorting out and keeping track of what is happening around us is a task in itself. Anyone who can influence the stories that are told has a big advantage.

Politics provides a process through which we can try to arrange our collective lives in some kind of social order so that we can live without crashing into each other at every turn, and to provide ourselves with goods and services we could not obtain alone. But politics is also about getting our own way. The way we choose may be a noble goal for society or pure self-interest, but the struggle we engage in is a political struggle. Because politics is about power and other scarce resources, there will always be winners and losers in politics. If we could always get our own way, politics would disappear. It is because we cannot always get what we want that politics exists.

Our capacity to be political gives us tools with which to settle disputes about the social order and to allocate scarce resources. The tools of politics are compromise and cooperation; discussion and debate; deal making, bargaining, storytelling; even,
sometimes, bribery and deceit. We use those tools to agree on the principles that should guide our handling of power and other scarce resources and to live our collective lives according to those principles. Because there are many competing narratives about how to manage power—who should have it, how it should be used, how it should be transferred—agreement on those principles can break down.

The tools of politics do not include violence. When people drop bombs, blow themselves up, or fly airplanes into buildings, they have tried to impose their ideas about the social order through nonpolitical means. That may be because the channels of politics have failed, because they cannot agree on basic principles, because they don’t share a common understanding of what counts as negotiation and so cannot craft compromises, because they are unwilling to compromise, or because they don’t really care about deal making at all—they just want to impose their will or make a point. The threat of violence may be a political tool used as leverage to get a deal, but when violence is employed, politics has broken down. Indeed, the human history of warfare attests to the fragility of political life.

It is easy to imagine what a world without politics would be like. There would be no resolution or compromise between conflicting interests, because those are political activities. There would be no agreements struck, bargains made, or alliances formed. Unless there were enough of every valued resource to go around, or unless the world were big enough that we could live our lives without coming into contact with other human beings, life would be constant conflict—what the philosopher Thomas Hobbes called in the seventeenth century a “war of all against all.” Individuals, unable to cooperate with one another (because cooperation is essentially political), would have no option but to resort to brute force to settle disputes and allocate resources. Politics is essential to our living a civilized life.

**POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT**

Although the words politics and government are sometimes used interchangeably, they refer to different things. Politics, we know, is a process or an activity through which power and resources are gained and lost. Government, by contrast, is a system or organization for exercising authority over a body of people.

American politics is what happens in the halls of Congress, on the campaign trail, at Washington cocktail parties, and in neighborhood association meetings. It is the making of promises, deals, and laws. American government is the Constitution and the institutions set up by the Constitution for the exercise of authority by the American people, over the American people.

Authority is power that citizens view as legitimate, or “right”—power to which we have given our implicit consent. Think of it this way: as children, we probably did as our parents told us, or submitted to their punishment if we didn’t, because we recognized their authority over us. As we became adults, we started to claim that our parents had less authority over us, that we could do what we wanted. We no longer saw their power as wholly legitimate or appropriate. Governments exercise authority because people recognize them as legitimate even if they often do not like doing what they are told (paying taxes, for instance). When governments cease to be regarded as legitimate, the result may be revolution or civil war, unless the state is powerful enough to suppress all opposition.

**RULES AND INSTITUTIONS**

Government is shaped by the process of politics, but it in turn provides the rules and institutions that shape the way politics continues to operate. The rules and institutions of government have a profound effect on how power is distributed and who wins and who loses in the political arena. Life is different
for people in other countries not only because they speak different languages and eat different foods but also because their governments establish rules that cause life to be lived in different ways.

Rules can be thought of as the how in the definition “who gets what . . . and how.” They are directives that determine how resources are allocated and how collective action takes place—that is, they determine how we try to get the things we want. The point of the rules is to provide some framework for us to solve without violence the problems that our collective lives generate.

Because the rules we choose can influence which people will get what they want most often, understanding the rules is crucial to understanding politics. Consider for a moment the impact a change of rules would have on the outcome of the sport of basketball, for instance. What if the average height of the players could be no more than 5’10”? What if the baskets were lowered? What if foul shots counted for two points rather than one? Basketball would be a very different game, and the teams recruited would look quite unlike the teams for which we now cheer. So it is with governments and politics: change the people who are allowed to vote or the length of time a person can serve in office, and the political process and the potential winners and losers change drastically.

Rules can be official—laws that are passed, signed, and entered into the books; amendments that are ratified; decisions made by bureaucrats; or judgments handed down by the courts. Less visible but no less important are norms, the tacitly understood rules about acceptable political behavior, ways of doing things, boundaries between the branches, and traditional practices that grease the wheels of politics and keep them running smoothly. Because norms are understood but not explicitly written down, we often don’t even recognize them until they are broken.

Let’s take an example close to home. Say it’s Thanksgiving dinner time and your brother decides he wants the mashed potatoes on the other side of the table. Imagine that, instead of asking to have them passed, he climbs up on the table and walks across the top of it with his big, dirty feet, retrieves the potatoes, clomps back across the table, jumps down, takes his seat, and serves himself some potatoes. Everyone is aghast, right? What he has just done just isn’t done. But when you challenge him, he says, “What, there’s a rule against doing that? I got what I wanted, didn’t I?” and you have to admit that? I got what I wanted, didn’t I?” and you have to admit what someone has done to get and maintain power—were the political narratives—the stories that people believe about who has power, who wants power, who deserves power, and what someone has done to get and maintain power—were the prerogative of authoritative sources like priests, kings, and their agents.

We can think of institutions as the where of the political struggle, though Lasswell didn’t include a “where” in his definition. They are the organizations where government power is exercised. In the United States, our rules provide for the institutions of a representative democracy—that is, rule by the elected representatives of the people, and for a federal political system. Our Constitution lays the foundation for the institutions of Congress, the presidency, the courts, and the bureaucracy as a stage on which the drama of politics plays itself out. Other systems might call for different institutions—perhaps an all-powerful parliament, or a monarch, or even a committee of rulers.

These complicated systems of rules and institutions do not appear out of thin air. They are carefully designed by the founders of different systems to create the kinds of society they think will be stable and prosperous, but also where people like themselves are likely to be winners. Remember that not only the rules but also the institutions we choose influence who most easily and most often get their own way.

**POWER, NARRATIVES, AND MEDIA**

From the start of human existence, an essential function of communication has been recording events, giving meaning to them and creating a story, or narrative, about how they fit into the past and stretch into the future. It is human nature to tell stories, to capture our experiential knowledge and beliefs and weave them together in ways that give larger meaning to our lives. Native peoples of many lands do it with their legends; the Greeks and Romans did it with their myths; Jews, Christians, Muslims, and other major religious groups do it with their holy texts; and the Brothers Grimm did it with their fairy tales. Human beings tell stories. It’s what we do, and it gives us our history and a way of passing that history down to new generations.

A major part of politics is about competing to have your narrative accepted as the authoritative account. Control of political information has always been a crucial resource when it comes to making and upholding a claim that one should be able to tell other people how to live their lives, but it used to be a power reserved for a few. Creation and dissemination of political narratives—the stories that people believe about who has power, who wants power, who deserves power, and what someone has done to get and maintain power—were the prerogative of authoritative sources like priests, kings, and their agents.

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**rules** directives that specify how resources will be distributed or what procedures govern collective activity

**norms** informal, unwritten expectations that guide behavior and support formal rule systems; often most noticeable when broken

**institutions** organizations in which government power is exercised

**political narrative** a persuasive story about the nature of power, who should have it, and how it should be used
Through much of our common history, the storytellers of those narratives were given special status. They were wise men or women, shamans, prophets, oracles, priests, and rabbis. And they were frequently in the service of chiefs, kings, emperors, and other people of enormous power. It’s no accident that the storytellers frequently told narratives that bolstered the status quo and kept the power structure in place. The storytellers and the power holders had a monopoly on control for so much of human history because books were in scarce supply and few people could read in any case or had the leisure to amass facts to challenge the prevailing narratives. The gatekeepers of information—those who determined what news got reported and how—were very few.

Before the seventeenth-century era known as the Enlightenment, there may have been competing narratives about who had claims to power, but they were not that hard to figure out. People’s allegiance to power was based on tribal loyalties, religious faith, or conquest. Governments were legitimate through the authority of God or the sword, and that was that. Because most people then were illiterate, that narrative was mediated, that is, passed to people through channels that could shape and influence it. Information flowed mostly through medieval clergy and monarchs, the very people who had a vested interest in getting people to believe it.

Even when those theories of legitimacy changed, information was still easily controlled because literacy rates were low and horses and wind determined the speed of communication until the advent of steam engines and radios. Early newspapers were read aloud, shared, and reshared, and a good deal of the news of the day was delivered from the pulpit. As we will see when we discuss the American founding, there were lively debates about whether independence was a good idea and what kind of political system should replace the colonial power structure, but by the time information reached citizens, it had been largely processed and filtered by those higher up the power ladder. Even the American rebels were elite and powerful men who could control their own narratives. Remember the importance of this when we read the story behind the Declaration of Independence in Chapter 3.

These days, we take for granted the ease with which we can communicate ideas to others all over the globe. Just a hundred years ago, radio was state of the art and television had yet to be invented. Today many of us carry access to a world of information and instant communication in our pockets.

When we talk about the channels through which information flows, and the ways that the channel itself might alter or control the narrative, we are referring to media. Just like a medium is a person through whom some people try to communicate with those who have died, media (the plural of medium) are channels of communication, as mentioned earlier. The integrity of the medium is critical. A scam artist might make money off the desire of grieving people to contact a lost loved one by making up the information she passes on. The monarch and clergy who channeled the narrative of the Holy Roman Empire were motivated by their wish to hold on to power. Think about water running through a pipe. Maybe the pipe is made of lead, or is rusty, or has leaks. Depending on the integrity of the pipe, the water we get will be toxic or rust-colored or limited. In the same way, the narratives and information we get can be altered by the way they are mediated, by the channels, or the media, through which we receive them.

POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

Whereas politics is concerned with the distribution of power and resources and the control of information in society, economics is concerned specifically with the production and distribution of society’s wealth—material goods such as bread, toothpaste, and housing, and services such as medical care, education, and entertainment. Because both politics and economics focus on the distribution of society’s resources, political and economic questions often get confused in contemporary life. Questions about how to pay for government, about government’s role in the economy, and about whether government or the private sector should provide certain services have political and economic dimensions. Because there are no clear-cut distinctions here, it can be difficult to keep these terms straight. The various forms of possible economic systems are shown in Figure 1.1, with complete government control (pure socialism) to the far left and no government control (pure capitalism) to the far right.

gatekeepers journalists and the media elite who determine which news stories are covered and which are not

economics production and distribution of a society’s material resources and services
The processes of politics and economics can be engaged in procedurally or substantively. In procedural political and economic systems, the legitimacy of the outcome is based on the legitimacy of the process that produced it—in other words, that the rules treat everyone fairly. In substantive political and economic systems, the legitimacy of the outcome depends on how widely accepted is the narrative the government tells about who should have what. The outcome is based on the decision of a powerful person or people, not a process people believe is impartial. In procedural systems, the means (process) justifies the ends; in substantive systems, the ends justify the means.

**SOCIALISM** In a socialist economy like that of the former Soviet Union, economic decisions are made not by individuals through the market but rather by politicians, based on their judgment of what society needs. These systems the state often owns the factories, land, and other resources necessary to produce wealth. Rather than trusting the market process to determine the proper distribution of material resources among individuals, politicians decide what the distribution ought to be—according to some principle like equality, need, or political reward—and then create economic policy to bring about that outcome. In other words, they emphasize substantive guarantees of what they believe to be fair outcomes, rather than procedural guarantees of fair rules and process.

The societies that have tried to put these theories into practice have ended up with repressive political systems, even though Karl Marx, the most famous of the theorists associated with socialism, hoped that eventually humankind would evolve to a point where each individual had control over their own life—a radical form of democracy. Since the socialist economies of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have fallen apart, socialism has been left with few supporters, although some nations, such as China, North Korea, and Cuba, still claim allegiance to it. Even China, however, introduced market-based reforms in the 1970s and by 2010 ranked as the world’s second largest economy, after the United States.

**CAPITALISM** Capitalism is a procedural economic system based on the working of the market—the process of

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**FIGURE 1.1**

A Comparison of Economic Systems

Economic systems are defined largely by the degree to which government owns the means by which material resources are produced (for example, factories and industry) and controls economic decision making. On a scale ranging from socialism—complete government ownership and control of the economy (on the left)—to laissez-faire capitalism—complete individual ownership and control of the economy (on the right)—social democracies would be located in the center. These hybrid systems are characterized by mostly private ownership of the means of production but considerable government control over economic decisions.
supply and demand. In a pure **capitalist economy**, all the means used to produce material resources (industry, business, and land, for instance) are owned privately, and decisions about production and distribution are left to individuals operating through the free-market process. Capitalist economies rely on the market to decide how much of a given item to produce or how much to charge for it. In capitalist countries, people do not believe that the government is capable of making such judgments (like how much toothpaste to produce), so they want to keep such decisions out of the hands of government and in the hands of individuals who they believe know best what they want. The most extreme philosophy that corresponds with this belief is called **laissez-faire capitalism**, from a French term that, loosely translated, means “let people do as they wish.” The government has no economic role at all in such a system, except perhaps to provide the national security in which the market forces can play out.

**MIXED ECONOMIES** Most real-world economies fall somewhere in between the idealized points of socialism and pure or laissez-faire capitalism, because most real-world countries have some substantive political goals that they want their economies to serve. The economies that fall in between the extremes are called mixed economies. **Mixed economies** are based on modified forms of capitalism, tempered by substantive values about how the market should work. In mixed economies, the fundamental economic decision-makers are individuals rather than the government. In addition, individuals may decide they want the government to step in and regulate behaviors that they think are not in the public interest. It is the type and degree of regulation that determines what kind of mixed economy it is.

**Democratic socialism** and **social democracy** are, as their names suggest, mixed economies that are a hybrid of democracy and socialism; they fall to the right of socialism in Figure 1.1. They are different from the pure socialist economy we discussed because they combine socialist ideals that empower government with a commitment to the political democratic principle of popular sovereignty and the economic principle of market capitalism that empowers individuals. The difference between them is that democratic socialists keep socialism as their end goal and social democrats are happy to keep the capitalist economy as long as they use the democratic process to attain some of the goals a socialist economy is supposed to produce (like more equality).

Socialism hybrids in theory, and often in practice, try to keep checks on government power to avoid the descent into authoritarianism that plagues most socialist experiments. They generally hold that there is a preferred distribution of stuff that requires prioritizing political goals over the market but that democracy is worth preserving as well.

When people claim to endorse a hybrid of democracy and socialism, note which word is the noun and which is the modifier. The noun will tell you where the true commitment lies. Democratic socialists (that is, “socialists”) prioritize the results of a socialist economy; social democrats (that is, “democrats”) prioritize the democratic process over economic outcomes.

Since World War II, the citizens of many Western European nations have elected social democrats to office, where they have enacted policies to bring about more equality—for instance, better housing, adequate health care for all, and the elimination of poverty and unemployment. Even where social democratic governments are voted out of office, such programs have proved so popular that it is often difficult for new leaders to alter them. Few people in the United States would identify themselves with social democracy, as presidential candidate Bernie Sanders found out in 2016 and 2020, although his campaign did help people understand that some versions of socialism did not require a wholesale elimination of capitalism and some of his proposals found their way into the Democratic Party platform.
Presidents for Life?
In March 2018, China’s legislature, the National People’s Congress, voted to change the country’s constitution to eliminate the existing ten-year presidential term limit, reaffirming authoritarianism in China’s political culture and setting up President Xi Jinping as a president for life. In March 2020, constitutional amendments were proposed by a member of Vladimir Putin’s United Russia Party that would allow Putin to run twice more for the presidency, opening up the possibility that he could remain in office until 2036. Putin had already served three four-year terms (with a break as Russian prime minister). Here, Presidents Xi and Putin meet up at a summit in Brazil in November 2019.

Regulated capitalism is also a hybrid system, but, unlike the socialist hybrids, it does not often prioritize political and social goals—like reducing inequality or redressing power inequities—as much as it does economic health. Although in theory the market ought to provide everything that people need and want—and should regulate itself as well—sometimes it fails. The notion that the market, an impartial process, has “failed” is a somewhat substantive one: it is the decision of a government that the outcome is not acceptable and should be replaced or altered to fit a political vision of what the outcome should be. When markets have ups and downs—periods of growth followed by periods of slowdown or recession—individuals and businesses look to government for economic security. If the market fails to produce some goods and services, like schools or highways, individuals expect the government to step in to produce them (using taxpayer funds). It is not very substantive—the market process still largely makes all the distributional decisions—but it is not laissez faire capitalism, either.

The dividing line between some of the socialism hybrids and regulated capitalism is not always crisp, as one may seem to blend into the other. The distinction to pay attention to is how much political control of the economy the system supports, and to what end. The judgment about what regulations are a legitimate use of government can be the subject of major political debates in democratic countries with mixed economies.

Like most other developed countries today, the United States has a system of regulated capitalism, which lies further to the right on the spectrum, closer to pure capitalism in Figure 1.1. It maintains a capitalist economy and individual freedom from government interference remains the norm, but it allows government to step in and regulate the economy to guarantee individual rights and to provide procedural guarantees that the rules will work smoothly and fairly.

In Your Own Words Describe the role that politics plays in determining how power and resources, including control of information, are distributed in a society.

POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND THE CONCEPT OF CITIZENSHIP

Competing ideas about power and the social order
Just as there are different kinds of economic systems on the substantive to procedural scale, there are many sorts of political systems, based on competing ideas about who should have power and what the social order should be—that is, how much substantive regulation there should be over individual decision-making. For our purposes, we can divide political systems into two types: those in which the government has the substantive power to impose a particular social order, deciding how individuals ought to behave, and those procedural systems in which individuals exercise personal power over most of their own behavior and ultimately over government as well. These two types of systems are different not just in a theoretical sense. The differences have very real implications for the people who live in them; the notion of citizenship (or the lack of it) is tied closely to the kind of political system a nation has.

Figure 1.2 compares these systems, ranging from the more substantive authoritarian governments that potentially have total power over their subjects to more procedural nonauthoritarian governments that permit citizens to limit the state’s power by claiming rights that the government must protect. Figure 1.3 shows what happens when we overlie our economic and political figures, giving us a model of most of the world’s political/economic systems. Note that when we say model, we are talking about abstractions from reality used as a tool to help us understand. We don’t pretend that all the details of the world are captured in a single two-dimensional figure, but we can get a better idea of the similarities and differences by looking at them this way.

AUTHORITARIAN SYSTEMS

Authoritarian governments give ultimate power to the state rather than to the people to decide how they ought to live.

regulated capitalism a market system in which the government intervenes to protect rights
authoritarian governments systems in which the state holds all power over the social order
Their lives. By “authoritarian governments,” we usually mean those in which the people cannot effectively claim rights against the state; where the state chooses to exercise its power, the people have no choice but to submit to its will.

Authoritarian governments can take various forms: sovereignty can be vested in an individual (dictatorship or monarchy), in God (theocracy), in the state itself (fascism), or in a ruling class (oligarchy). When a system combines an authoritarian government with a socialist economy, we say that the system is totalitarian (in the lower-left quadrant of Figure 1.3). As in the earlier example of the former Soviet Union, a totalitarian system exercises its power over every part of society—economic, social, political, and moral—leaving little or no private realm for individuals.

But an authoritarian state may also limit its own power. In such cases, it may deny individuals rights in those spheres where it chooses to act, but it may leave large areas of society, such as a capitalist economy, free from government interference. China and Singapore are examples of this type of authoritarian capitalism, in the lower-right quadrant of Figure 1.3. In these systems, people have considerable economic freedom, but stringent social regulations limit their noneconomic behavior.

Authoritarian governments often pay lip service to the people, but when push comes to shove, as it usually does in such states, the people have no effective power against the government. Again, to use the terminology we introduced earlier, government does not provide guarantees of fair processes for individuals; it guarantees a substantive vision of what life will be like—what individuals will believe, how they will act, what they will choose. Consequently, in authoritarian governments, the narrative is not up for debate. The rulers set the narrative and control the flow of information so that it supports their version of why they should have power. They do not tolerate any criticism of their government, and they use their power to stifle those who do try to criticize them. Subjects of these governments accept the narrative for a variety of reasons: there is no free media, communication with the outside world is limited, or they may be afraid to do otherwise. Authoritarian rulers often use punishment to coerce uncooperative subjects into obedience.

NONAUTHORITARIAN SYSTEMS

In nonauthoritarian systems, ultimate power rests with individuals to make decisions concerning their lives. The most extreme form of nonauthoritarianism is called anarchy. Anarchists would do away with government and laws altogether. People advocate anarchy because they value the freedom to do whatever they want more than they value the order and security that governments provide by forbidding or regulating certain kinds of behavior. Few people are true anarchists, however. Anarchy may sound attractive in theory, but the inherent difficulties of the position make it hard to practice. For instance, how could you even organize a revolution to get rid of government without some rules about who is to do what and how decisions are to be made?
A less extreme form of nonauthoritarian government, and one much more familiar to us, is democracy (from the Greek demos, meaning “people”). In democracies, government is not external to the people, as it is in authoritarian systems; in a fundamental sense, government is the people. Democracies are based on the principle of popular sovereignty; that is, there is no power higher than the people and, in the United States, the document establishing their authority, the Constitution. The central idea here is that no government is considered legitimate unless the governed consent to it, and people are not truly free unless they live under a law of their own making.

Recognizing that collective life usually calls for some restrictions on what individuals may do (laws forbidding murder or theft, for instance), democracies nevertheless try to maximize freedom for the individuals who live under them. Although they generally make decisions through some sort of majority rule, democracies still provide procedural guarantees to preserve individual rights—usually protections of due process and minority rights. This means that if individuals living in a democracy feel their rights have been violated, they have the right to ask government to remedy the situation.

There are many institutional variations on democracy. Some democracies make the legislature (the representatives of the people) the most important authority; some retain a monarch with limited powers; and some hold referenda at the national level to get direct feedback on how the people want the government to act on specific issues.

Most democratic forms of government, because of their commitment to procedural values, practice a capitalist form of economics. Fledgling democracies may rely on a high degree of government economic regulation, but advanced industrial democracies (in the upper-right quadrant of

**FIGURE 1.3**

**Political and Economic Systems**

*Political systems work in conjunction with economic systems, but government control over the economy does not necessarily translate into tight control over the social order. We have identified four possible combinations of these systems, signified by the labeled points in each quadrant. These points are approximate, however, and some nations cannot be classified so easily. Sweden is an advanced industrial democracy by most measures, for instance, but because of its commitment to substantive economic values, it would be located much closer to the vertical axis.*

**DEMOCRACY** A less extreme form of nonauthoritarian government, and one much more familiar to us, is democracy (from the Greek demos, meaning “people”). In democracies, government is not external to the people, as it is in authoritarian systems; in a fundamental sense, government is the people. Democracies are based on the principle of popular sovereignty; that is, there is no power higher than the people and, in the United States, the document establishing their authority, the Constitution. The central idea here is that no government is considered legitimate unless the governed consent to it, and people are not truly free unless they live under a law of their own making.

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that sees democracy merely as a process of choosing among is a narrative elite democracy and for individuals. For instance, in a democracy. They argue for power at the top, in groups, much and in what ways popular power should be exercised to the rights of those who disagree? And, of course, majority rule brings with it the problem of minority rights. If the majority gets its way, what happens as the number of people who are required to agree grows. Is it 50 percent plus one? Two-thirds? Three-fourths? Decision making becomes increasingly difficult as the number of people who are required to agree grows. And, of course, majority rule brings with it the problem of minority rights. If the majority gets its way, what happens to the rights of those who disagree?

Not surprisingly, there are multiple narratives about how much and in what ways popular power should be exercised in a democracy. They argue for power at the top, in groups, and for individuals. For instance, elite democracy is a narrative that sees democracy merely as a process of choosing among competing leaders; for the average citizen, input ends after the leader is chosen.7 Advocates of the narrative of pluralist democracy argue that what is important is not so much individual participation but rather membership in groups that participate in government decision making on their members’ behalf.8 Supporters of the narrative of participatory democracy claim that individuals have the right to control all the circumstances of their lives, and direct democratic participation should take place not only in government but in industry, education, and community affairs as well.9 For advocates of this view, democracy is more than a way to make decisions: it is a way of life, an end in itself. In practice, those who argue for democratic government probably include elements of more than one of these democratic narratives; they are not mutually exclusive.

Ironically, some present-day democracies are now experiencing backlashes of populism—social movements that promote the narrative that democracy has concentrated power at an elite level and neglected the concerns of ordinary people. Because populism is a narrative based on the grievances of people who believe they are getting less than they deserve, it is relatively easy for an authoritarian figure to exploit. Often these movements backfire on the people who support them and result in the seizing of authoritarian power by an individual or group who claims to wield it in the name of the people but does not. Turkey and Venezuela are extreme examples of this, but there are serious populist movements in many democratic countries today, including the United States.

THE ROLE OF THE PEOPLE

What is important about the political and economic systems we have been sorting out here is that they have a direct impact on the lives of the people who live in them. So far we have given a good deal of attention to the latter parts of Lasswell’s definition of politics. But easily as important as the what and the how in Lasswell’s formulation is the who. Underlying the different political theories we have looked at are fundamental differences in the powers and opportunities possessed by everyday people.

THE PEOPLE AS SUBJECTS In authoritarian systems, the people are subjects of their government. They possess no rights that protect them from that government; they must do whatever the government says or face the consequences, without any other recourse. They have obligations to the state but no rights or privileges to offset those obligations. They may be winners or losers in government decisions, but they have very little control over which it may be.

Do subjects enjoy any advantages that citizens don’t have?

THE PEOPLE AS CITIZENS Everyday people in democratic systems have a potentially powerful role to play. They are more than mere subjects; they are citizens, or members of a political community with rights as well as obligations. Democratic theory says that power is drawn from the people, that the people are sovereign, that they must consent to be governed, and that their government must respond to their will. In practical terms, this may not seem to mean much, since not consenting doesn’t necessarily give us the right to disobey government. It does give us

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**communist democracy** a utopian system in which property is communally owned and all decisions are made democratically

**populism** social movements based on the idea that power has been concentrated illegitimately among elites at the people’s expense

**subjects** individuals who are obliged to submit to a government authority against which they have no rights

**citizens** members of a political community with both rights and responsibilities
the option of leaving, however, and seeking a more congenial set of rules elsewhere.

Theoretically, democracies are ruled by “the people,” but different democracies have at times been very selective about whom they count as citizens. Just because a system is called a democracy is no guarantee that all or even most of its residents possess the status of citizen.

In democratic systems, the rules of government can provide for all sorts of different roles for those they designate as citizens. At a minimum, citizens possess certain rights, or powers to act, that government cannot limit, although these rights vary in different democracies. Citizens of democracies also possess obligations or responsibilities to the public realm. They have the obligation to obey the law, for instance, once they have consented to the government (even if that consent amounts only to not leaving); they may also have the obligation to pay taxes, serve in the military, or sit on juries. Some theorists argue that truly virtuous citizens should put community interests ahead of personal interests.

In Your Own Words Compare how power is distributed between citizens and government in different economic and political systems.

ORIGINS OF DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

From divine right to social contract

Government in the United States is the product of particular decisions the founders made about the who, what, and how of American politics. There was nothing inevitable about those decisions and, had the founders decided otherwise, our system would look very different indeed.

Given the world in which the founders lived, democracy was not an obvious choice for them, and many scholars argue that in some respects the system they created is not very democratic. We can see this more clearly if we understand the intellectual heritage of the early Americans, their historical experience, and the theories about government that informed them.

EUROPEAN SOURCES OF DEMOCRATIC THOUGHT AND PRACTICE

The heyday of democracy, of course, was ancient Athens, from about 500 to 300 BCE. Even Athenian democracy was a pretty selective business. To be sure, it was rule by “the people,” but “the people” was defined narrowly to exclude women, enslaved people, youth, and resident aliens. Athenian democracy was not built on values of equality, even of opportunity, except for the 10 percent of the population defined as citizens. We can see parallels here to early colonial American democracy, which restricted participation in political affairs to a relatively small number of white men with wealth and particular religious beliefs.

Limited as Athenian democracy was, it was positively wide open compared to most forms of government that existed during the Middle Ages, from roughly AD 600 to 1500. During this period, monarchs gradually consolidated their power over their subjects, and some even challenged the greatest political power of the time, the Catholic Church. Authoritarianism was a lot easier to pull off when few people could read; maintaining a single narrative about power that enforced authoritarian rule was relatively simple. For instance, as we see in Chapter 3, the narrative of the divine right of kings kept monarchs in Europe on their thrones by insisting that those rulers were God’s representatives on earth and that to say otherwise was not just a crime but a sin.

Following the development of the printing press in 1439, more people gained literacy. Information could be mediated independently of those in power, and competing narratives could grab a foothold. Martin Luther promoted the narrative behind the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648) to weaken the power of the Catholic Church. Luther’s ideas spread and were embraced by a number of European monarchs, leading to a split between Catholic and Protestant countries. Where the Catholic Church was seen as unnecessary, it lost political as well as religious clout, and its decline paved the way for new ideas about the world. Those new ideas came with the Enlightenment period of the late 1600s and 1700s, when ideas about science and the possibilities of knowledge began to blow away the shadows and cobwebs of medieval superstition. Enlightenment philosophy said that human beings were not at the mercy of a world they could not understand, but rather, as rational human beings, they could learn the secrets of nature and harness the world to do their bidding. The political narratives of classical liberalism that emerged from the Enlightenment emphasized individual rights and nonauthoritarianism.

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

One of the key classical liberal narratives was the social contract, a story that said power is derived not from God but from the consent of the governed. Philosopher John Locke argued that before government comes into being, people have natural rights. They give up some of those rights in order to have the convenience of government but...
Dan Savage could not tell us about the start of his It Gets Better Project without choking up, and we could not hear about it without tears of our own. It started with the desperation of a young man named Billy Lucas, who had been bullied because kids said he was gay, and whose ultimate suicide filled Savage with rage that day in New York in 2010. It grieved Savage that Lucas did not have someone to reassure him and tell him in concrete ways how to survive the crappy, terrorized years so that he could have caught a glimpse of the full life that would have one day been his.

Savage, a journalist and the author of the advice column and podcast Savage Love at the Seattle indie paper The Stranger, says he survived the tough, bullying years of high school because “I never regarded my homosexuality as something damaged, or wrong, or sinful about myself. I regarded the homophobia, and the hatred, and the discrimination, and the violence as the problem.”

That confidence in who he is and his Catholic upbringing and education also fueled a fiery sense of social justice and a steely patience that made Savage realize that change happens slowly, one doable action at a time. He had come of age as an activist in ACT UP: “It was really hyper-organized and included this structure where people could show up and participate and then melt back into the crowd and go home,” he says. “I’ve always felt that one of the jobs from people like me, who still considers himself an activist, is not to guilt, and not to harange, and not to ‘where were you’ when you weren’t at the meeting; it’s to identify the doable thing that people who can’t be active 24/7 can do, and say, ‘Here’s this doable thing. Do it.’”

The “one doable thing” philosophy informed Savage’s work in Seattle, where he acquired an army of devoted Savage Love followers by basically entertaining them most of the time and urging them to action a tiny bit of the time.

So, sitting on that train in 2010, fuming with anger at the kids who had tormented Billy Lucas and then had taken to Lucas’s Facebook page to continue the bullying after his death, there was that one, doable thing. Savage and his husband, Terry Miller, sat in front of their computer and recorded a simple message to those kids: “It Gets Better.” It told of the misery of the bullying they faced as kids and the joyful family and love-filled moments of the lives they live today, the promise that the intolerance of others would one day fade in importance, if they could just endure and look forward. He and Miller posted their video on YouTube, and it went viral: “Here’s a doable thing. You can sit in front of your computer for ten minutes and you can talk.” In time, all kinds of people added their own stories. Today there are more than fifty thousand videos on the itgetsbetter.org website.

Billy Lucas had become a catalyst for the saving of so many others. And in the process, Savage’s work has accelerated the normalization of being LGBTQ as a simple part of being human. The nature of single doable acts is that they don’t work alone. They build and they gather speed and they don’t require the organization of armies, just the willingness of one person to carry the sword. It is Savage’s genius to take advantage of that and to use social media to avoid the pitfalls and infighting and burnout that political organization in pursuit of social change so often falls victim to.

On patriotism

“We’re an idea, and we’re a document, and we’re a promise . . . . I do believe that the United States is the last best hope on Earth, as Lincoln said . . . because the United States, in its founding documents, in its founding idea, was an idea about creating a more perfect union . . . . That’s what fills me with kind of patriotic fervor. It’s the political process and the idea that America is an unfinished thing that is imperfect and will never be perfect, but that we can keep working on making [it] more perfect.”

On keeping the republic

“You’re either going to be the person who can identify the doable thing, which I think is the most effective kind of activism, or be a person who is willing to jump in when asked to do the doable thing. Those are your options. Pick one or pick the other. Don’t be that person who does nothing: doesn’t pitch in, doesn’t help, can’t be bothered to do the doable thing, and then sit[s] there and complain about the state of the world.”

Source: Dan Savage spoke with Christine Barbour and Gerald C. Wright on September 9, 2016.
Chapter 1: Politics

retain enough of them to rebel against that government if it fails to protect their rights. For it to work, the social contract requires that people have freedom to criticize the government (that is, to create counternarratives) and that information and narratives flow through channels that are protected from the influence of those in power.

As we will see in Chapter 3, Thomas Jefferson was clearly influenced by Locke’s work. The Declaration of Independence is itself a founding narrative of the rights of Americans: it tells a story about how the British violated those rights and was designed to combat the British narrative that America should remain part of its colonial empire.

AS THE FOUNDERS SAW IT

While philosophers in Europe were beginning to explore the idea of individual rights and democratic governance, there had long been democratic stirrings on the founders’ home continent. The Iroquois Confederacy was an alliance of five (and eventually six) East Coast Native American nations whose constitution, the “Great Law of Peace,” impressed American leaders such as Benjamin Franklin with its suggestions of federalism, separation of powers, checks and balances, and consensus building. Although historians are not sure that these ideas had any direct influence on the founders’ thinking about American governance, they were clearly part of the stew of ideas that the founders could dip into, and some scholars make the case that their influence was significant.10

Meanwhile, literacy among average citizens remained limited. Political elites still played a major role in mediating information, but new channels also started to play a part—newspapers, pastors, and publicans all began to shape narratives. For our purposes, the most important thing about these ideas about politics is that they were prevalent at the same time the American founders were thinking about how to build a new government. Locke particularly influenced the writings of James Madison, a major author of the U.S. Constitution. Like Locke, Madison thought government had a duty to protect property. At first he was hopeful that, with a fresh start in a new country, citizens would be driven by innate notions of republican virtue to put the interests of the public over their own self-interests.

Public behavior after the Revolution disillusioned him, however, and Madison ended up rejecting notions of “pure democracy,” in which all citizens would have direct power to control

Whose Hong Kong Is It, Anyway?

Millions of Hong Kongers have taken to the streets since June 2019, originally in opposition to a now-abandoned proposal to allow extraditions to mainland China. The protest movement morphed into demands for greater democratic freedoms and police accountability, a clash of culture with China’s authoritarian leadership. Previously an English colony, Hong Kong was turned over to the Chinese in 1997, and even though it has a special status, the Chinese cannot afford to let it call its own shots, even though Hong Kong’s own heritage is that of an advanced industrialized nation.

Anthony Kwan/Getty Images

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government, opting instead for what he called a “republic.” A republic, according to Madison, would differ from a democracy by relying on representation and would be more appropriate in a large polity where there would be a lot of citizens to be heard. It also limited the involvement of those citizens to choosing their representatives, not doing any actual governing.

**In Your Own Words**  
Explain the historical origins of American democracy and the ways that the available media controlled the political narrative.

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**THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP**

*From the founding era to the digital age*

Unlike the founders, certainly, but even unlike most of the people currently running this country (who are, let’s face it, kind of old), people born in this century are almost all digital natives. They have been born in an era in which not only are most people hooked up to electronic media, but they also live their lives partly in cyberspace as well as in “real space.” For many of us, the lives we live are often mediated—that is, with much, if not most, of our relationships, our education, our news, our travel, our sustenance, our purchases, our daily activities, our job seeking, and our very sense of ourselves being influenced by, experienced through, or shared via electronic media. That reality was brought home thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, which required our classes, relationships, worship, work, medical consultations, commerce, and even social gatherings to take place in a mediated form. When direct, one-on-one connections become impossible or dangerous, some form of mediation is the only way to carry them out. COVID-19 taught us how valuable and yet dispensable face-to-face communication can be in a digital age.

Essentially, in a digital age we conduct our lives through channels that, like that water pipe we talked about earlier, may be made of lead, may be rusty, or may be full of holes. When we search online, certain links are offered first according to the calculations made by the search engine we use. When we shop online, we are urged to buy certain products that an algorithm thinks we will like or that people like us have purchased. When we travel, certain flights and hotels are flagged, and when we use social media, certain posts appear while others don’t. Most of us don’t check very hard to ensure that the information on which we base our choices isn’t emerging from the cyberequivalent of lead pipes.

A mediated world has all kinds of implications for everyday living and loving and working. The implications we care about here are the political implications for our roles as citizens—the ones to do with how we exercise and are impacted by power. We will be turning to these implications again and again throughout this book.

Even though Americans today still largely adhere to the basic governing narrative the founders promoted, the country is now light years removed from the founding era, when communication was limited by illiteracy and the scarcity of channels through which it could pass. Consider the timeline in Figure 1.4. It follows the development of the media through which we get information, receive narratives, and send out our own information (see also Snapshot of America: How Do We Engage Politically Online?). Being a citizen in a mediated world is just flat out different from being one in the world in which James Madison wrote the Constitution. It’s the genius of the Constitution that it has been able to navigate the transition successfully, so far. The mediated world we live in gives us myriad new ways to keep the republic and some pretty high-tech ways to lose it. That puts a huge burden on us as mediated citizens, and it also opens up a world of opportunity.

Among the things we disagree on in this country is what it means to be a citizen. James Madison obviously had some thoughts on that subject. As mentioned earlier, he hoped citizens—the ones to do with how we exercise and are impacted by power. We will be turning to these implications again and again throughout this book.

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Among the things we disagree on in this country is what it means to be a citizen. James Madison obviously had some thoughts on that subject. As mentioned earlier, he hoped people would be so filled with what he called republican virtue that they would readily sacrifice their self-interest to advance the public interest. As we will see in Chapter 3, this public-interested citizenship proved not to be the rule,
**Snapshot of America: How Do We Engage Politically Online?**

- Feel social media are important for getting involved with political or social issues that are personally important: 40%
- Look for information about rallies or protests happening in own area: 40%
- Believe social media are important for given venue to express one’s own political opinions: 37%
- Take part in a group that shares an interest in an issue or cause: 36%
- Encourage others to take action on issues that are important to you: 34%
- Change own profile picture to show support for a cause: 20%
- Use hashtags related to a political or social issue: 15%

**Believe Social Media Are Important for**

- Creating sustained movements for social change: 68%
- Getting elected officials to pay attention to issues: 69%
- Giving a voice to under-represented groups: 65%
- Making it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their actions: 57%

**Behind the Numbers**

Social media enable citizens to engage with their government, the news media, and each other much more efficiently than in previous decades. But widespread and easy access to political information comes to us with few quality checks. Did you engage politically during the 2020 presidential election in any of the ways listed above? In what ways might social media affect political outcomes?

much to Madison’s disappointment. Instead, early Americans demonstrated **self-interested citizenship**, trying to use the system to get the most they could for themselves. This was a dilemma for Madison because he was designing a constitution that depended on the nature of the people being governed. He believed he had solved that dilemma by creating a political system that would check our self-interested nature and produce laws that would support the public interest.

*When, if ever, should individuals be asked to sacrifice their own good for that of their country?*

Still, the Constitution has not put that conflict to rest. Today there are plenty of people who put country first—who enlist in the armed services, sometimes giving their lives for their nation, or who go into law enforcement or teaching or other lower paying careers because they want to serve. There are people who cheerfully pay their taxes because it’s a privilege to live in a free democracy where you can climb the ladder of opportunity. Especially in moments of national trouble—after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001, for instance, or during the COVID-19 pandemic—Americans willingly help their fellow citizens.

At the same time, the day-to-day business of life turns most people inward. Many people care about self and family and friends, but most don’t have the energy or inclination to get beyond that. President John Kennedy challenged his “fellow Americans” in 1961 to “ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country,” but only a rare few have the time or motivation to take up that challenge.

Unlike the citizens Madison and his colleagues designed a constitution for, mediated citizens experience the world through multiple channels of information and interaction. That doesn’t change whether citizens are self-interested or public-interested, but it does give them more opportunities and raise more potential hazards for being both.

Many older Americans who are not digital natives nonetheless experience political life through television or through web surfing and commenting, usually anonymously and often rudely. This is not always a positive addition to our civil discourse, but they are trying to adapt. You may have grandparents who fit this description. They probably want to know why you are not on Facebook.

But more media-savvy millennials, Gen Xers, and even some tech-savvy Baby Boomers not only have access to traditional media if they choose but also are accustomed to interacting, conducting friendships and family relationships,

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**FIGURE 1.4 Media Timeline**

It is notable that over the long history of humankind’s relationship with the printed word, a majority of the most significant technological developments, other than the 1439 invention of the printing press, have taken place over the last 100 years.
and generally attending to the details of their lives through electronic channels. Their digital selves exist in networks of friends and acquaintances who take for granted that they can communicate in seconds. They certainly get their news digitally and increasingly organize, register to vote, enlist in campaigns, and call each other to action that way.

In fact, as we saw earlier, hashtag activism, the forming of social movements through viral calls to act politically—whether to march, to boycott, to contact politicians, or to vote—has become common enough that organizers warn that action has to go beyond cyberspace to reach the real world or it will have limited impact. #BlackLivesMatter, #ItGetsBetter, and #NeverAgain are just three very different, very viral, very successful ways of using all the channels available to us to call attention to a problem and propose solutions.

Although living an intensely mediated life has the potential to broaden our horizons and expose us to multiple views and cultures, it does not automatically produce public-minded citizens. People can easily remain self-interested in this digital world. We can customize our social media to give us only news and information that confirms what we already think. We can live in an information bubble where everything we see and hear reinforces our narratives. That makes us more or less sitting ducks for whatever media narrative is directed our way, whether from inside an online media source or from a foreign power that weaponizes social media to influence an election, as the Russians did in both 2016 and 2020. Without opening ourselves up to multiple information and action channels, we can live an unexamined mediated life.

But mediated citizenship also creates enormous opportunities that the founders never dreamed of. Truth to tell, Madison wouldn’t have been all that thrilled about the multiple ways to be political that the mediated citizen possesses. He thought citizens should be seen on election day, but not heard most of the time, precisely because he thought we would push our own interests and destabilize the system. He was reassured by the fact that it would take days for an express letter trying to create a dissenting political organization to reach Georgia from Maine. Our mediated world has blown that reassuring prospect to smithereens.

Mediated citizens are not only the receivers and distributors of narratives from powerful people, like the TV-watching couch potato or earbud-wearing student with her eyes fixed on Insta. We can be the creators and disseminators of our own narratives, something that would have terrified the old monarchs comfortably ensconced in their divine right narrative. Even the founders would have been extremely nervous about what the masses might get up to.

As mediated citizens, we have unprecedented access to power, but we are also targets of the use of unprecedented power—attempts to shape our views and control our experiences. That means it is up to us to pay critical attention to what is happening in the world around us.

**In Your Own Words** Describe the enduring tension in the United States between self-interested human nature and public-spirited government and the way that has been shaped in a mediated world.

**THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT AMERICAN POLITICS**

*How to use the themes and features in this book*

Our primary goal in this book is to get you thinking critically about American politics, especially about the political narratives that you encounter every day. Critical thinking is the analysis and evaluation of ideas and arguments based on reason and evidence—it means digging deep into what you read and what you hear and asking tough questions. Critical thinking is what all good scholars do, and it is also what savvy citizens do.

Our analytic and evaluative tasks in this book focus on the twin themes of power and citizenship. We have adopted the classic definition of politics proposed by the late political scientist Harold Lasswell that politics is “who gets what when and how.” We simplify his understanding by dropping the “when” and focusing on politics as the struggle by citizens over who gets power and resources in society and how they get them, but we also consider how the struggle for power and resources can change dramatically over time.

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**hashtag activism** a form of political engagement that occurs by organizing individuals online around a particular issue

**information bubble** a closed cycle, sometimes self-created, in which all the information we get reinforces the information we already have, solidifying our beliefs without reference to outside reality checks
DON'T BEfooLED BY... 

Your Own Information Bubble

Technologies that enable citizens to connect with one another, to engage in lively debate, and to organize for common purposes hold great promise for democracy. The power to communicate on a massive scale was once held only by governments and those with access to print or broadcast media outlets, but today it is in the hands of anyone with a cell phone. As every superhero learns, with great power comes great responsibility. There is no guarantee that what you learn through social media is true, and if you are sharing information that isn’t reality based, you are helping to perpetuate a false narrative.

In addition, your social media feeds and even your browser are working against you, ensuring that the news that comes your way is tailored to your interests and preconceptions, creating what one observer calls a filter bubble. Whether your news feed is custom made or crowd sourced, always look before you “like” since social media algorithms can channel information to you that reinforces the narrative you get about “who gets what and how” in today’s political world.

What to Watch Out For

- **Don't create your own echo chamber.** Social networking sites and other tools make it easy to create your own custom news channel, ensuring that you see stories from sources you like, about subjects that interest you. Important stories can easily slip past you, and your understanding of political matters will suffer. But if you follow only the political sources you like, that will get you in trouble, too. So open yourself up to alternative sources of news and opinions that you might find offensive or wrong. If what’s showing up in your news feed does not challenge your ideas and beliefs from time to time, consider whether you’ve been censoring news that you don’t like. Make sure you’re getting all sides of the story, not just the one that you want to hear.

- **Don’t trust your browser.** It’s not just your self-selected social media feeds that are shaping your information diet; every link you click and word you search is fed into complex algorithms that tailor your results into a custom feed of “things you might like.” Just as Amazon knows what items to suggest based on your browsing and purchase history, your Google results are similarly parsed and packaged for your viewing pleasure. Two people searching on a particular topic will get very different results. Search around—don’t just click on the first links offered to you.

- **Separate truth from truthiness.** Some of the most compelling (and viral) political material on the Internet comes from people who are intent on selling you on their narrative. Their arguments may be valid, and their evidence may be strong—but bear in mind that an opinion piece is different from a statement of fact. Take care to seek out news sources that strive for objectivity and don’t have an ax to grind (such as the Associated Press or the news pages of the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, or *Politico*) alongside those that offer analysis and argument.

- **Don’t be complacent about conventional news sources.** While you are watching your social networks and second-guessing Google algorithms, don’t neglect old-fashioned news sources. If you watch television news, make a point of changing the channel often, especially if one of the stations has an ideological agenda like Fox or MSNBC. Ditto on the talk radio shows and late-night comedy. In fact, try to have political discussions with different groups of people, too. The more sources you use to gather information, the harder it will be for you to lose touch with political reality.

Accordingly, in this book, we analyze American politics in terms of three sets of questions:

- Who are the parties involved? What resources, powers, and rights do they bring to the struggle?
- What do they have at stake? What do they stand to win or lose? Is it power, influence, position, policy, or values?
- How do the rules shape the outcome? Where do the rules come from? What strategies or tactics do the political actors employ to use the rules to get what they want?
The Critical Importance of Critical Thinking

This book is an introduction to American politics, and in a way it also is an introduction to political science. Political science is not exactly the same kind of science as biology or geology. Not only is it difficult to put our subjects (people and political systems) under a microscope to observe their behavior, but we also are somewhat limited in our ability to test our theories. We cannot replay World War II to test our ideas about what caused it, for example. A further problem is our subjectivity; we are the phenomena under investigation, and so we may have stronger feelings about our research and our findings than we would about, say, cells and rocks.

These difficulties do not make a science of politics impossible, but they do mean we must proceed with caution. Even among political scientists, disagreement exists about whether a rigorous science of the political world is a reasonable goal. We can agree, however, that it is possible to advance our understanding of politics beyond mere guessing or debates about political preferences. Although we use many methods in our work (statistical analysis, mathematical modeling, case studies, and philosophical reasoning, to name only a few), what political scientists have in common is an emphasis on critical thinking about politics.

Critical thinking means challenging the conclusions of others, asking why or why not, and exploring alternative interpretations. It means considering the sources of information—not accepting an explanation just because someone in authority offers it, or because you have always been told that it is the true explanation, but because you have discovered independently that there are good reasons for accepting it. You may emerge from reading this textbook with the same ideas about politics that you have always had; it is not our goal to change your mind. But as a critical thinker, you will be able to back up your old ideas with new and persuasive arguments of your own, or to move beyond your current ideas to see politics in a new light.

Becoming adept at critical thinking has a number of benefits:

- **We learn to be good democratic citizens.** Critical thinking helps us sort through the barrage of information that regularly assails us, and it teaches us to process this information thoughtfully. Critical awareness of what our leaders are doing and the ability to understand and evaluate what they tell us is the lifeblood of democratic government.

- **We are better able to hold our own in political (or other) arguments.** We think more logically and clearly, we are more persuasive, and we impress people with our grasp of reason and fact. There is not a career in the world that is not enhanced by critical thinking skills.

- **We become much better students.** The skills of the critical thinker are the skills of the scholar. When we read critically, we figure out what is important quickly and easily, we know what questions to ask to tease out more meaning, we can decide whether what we are reading is worth our time, and we know what to take with us and what to discard.

It may sound a little dull and dusty, but critical thinking can be a vital and enjoyable activity. When we are good at it, it empowers and liberates us. We are not at the mercy of others’ conclusions and decisions. We can evaluate facts and arguments for ourselves, turning conventional wisdom upside down and exploring the world of ideas with confidence.

**How does one learn to think critically?**

The trick to learning how to think critically is to do it. It helps to have a model to follow, however, and we provide one in *The Big Picture*, which traces this process. The focus of critical thinking here is on understanding political argument. Argument in this case refers not to a confrontation or a fight, but rather to a contention, based on a set of assumptions, supported by evidence, and leading to a clear, well-developed conclusion with consequences for how we understand the world.

Critical thinking involves constantly asking questions about the arguments we read: Who has created it, what is the basic case and what values underlie it, what evidence is used to back it up, what conclusions are drawn, and what difference does the whole thing make? To help you remember the questions to ask, we have used a mnemonic device that creates an acronym from the five major steps of critical thinking. Until asking these questions becomes second nature, thinking of them as CLUES to critical thinking about American politics will help you keep them in mind. To help you develop the critical thinking habit, readings featured in each chapter of this book will provide a CLUES model for you to follow.

This is what CLUES stands for:

- Consider the source and the audience
- Lay out the argument and the underlying values and assumptions
- Uncover the evidence
- Evaluate the conclusion
- Sort out the political significance

When you read each of the CLUES to Critical Thinking features in the book, keep in mind *The Big Picture*.

If you know who is involved in a political situation, what is at stake, and how (under what rules) the conflict over resources will eventually be resolved, you will have a pretty good grasp of what is going on, and you will probably be able to figure out new situations, even when your days of taking a course in American government are far behind you. To get you in the habit of asking those questions, we have designed several features in this text explicitly to reinforce them.

As you found at the start of your reading, each chapter opens with key tasks that we expect you to be able to perform, In Your Own Words, which will help you to set goals for your reading and evaluate whether or not you’ve accomplished them. Each chapter begins with a What’s at Stake . . . ? feature that analyzes a political situation in terms of what various groups of citizens stand to win or lose, and ends with Let’s Revisit . . . , in which we reconsider those issues once you have the substantive material of the chapter under your belt. We also focus our analysis along the way by closing each major chapter section, beginning in Chapter 2, with a Pause and Review feature that explicitly addresses the questions of who gets what, and how they get it; concisely summarizes what you have learned; and asks you to put your understanding in your own words.

We reinforce the task of analysis with a Don’t Be Fooled by . . . feature that discusses ways you can improve your critical thinking skills by analyzing (that is, taking apart) different sources of information about politics. Similarly, CLUES to Critical Thinking readings in each chapter provide a text that is central to the material you are learning to give you some practice in using the critical thinking model we described in The Big Picture.

In addition to focusing on analysis of what you read, we offer graphics that will help you visualize processes and data that affect and are affected by politics. The Big Picture infographics relate the book’s themes to the big concepts, big processes, and big data that will help you make sense of American politics. Snapshots of America provide you with a lot more data to help you understand who the American people are and to help you dig into the question of what challenges our diversity poses for the task of governance. Finally, we highlighted key questions throughout each chapter, challenging you to take the analysis one step further: What if the rules or the actors or the stakes were different? What would be the impact on American politics? How would it work differently?

**EVALUATION**

As political scientists, however, we want not only to understand how the system works but also to assess how well it works. A second task of critical thinking is evaluation, or seeing how well something measures up according to a standard or principle. We could choose any number of standards by which to evaluate American politics, but the most relevant, for most of us, is the principle of democracy and the role of citizens.

We can draw on the traditions of self-interested and public-interested citizenship and the opportunities offered by digital citizenship to evaluate the powers, opportunities, and challenges presented to American citizens by the system of government under which they live. In addition to the two competing threads of citizenship in America, we can also look at the kinds of action that citizens engage in and whether they take advantage of the options available to them. For instance, citizen action might be restricted by the rules, or by popular interest, to merely choosing between competing candidates for office, as in the model of elite democracy described earlier. Alternatively, the rules of the system might encourage citizens to band together in groups to get what they want, as they do in pluralist democracy. Or the system might be open and offer highly motivated citizens a variety of opportunities to get involved, as they do in participatory democracy. American democracy has elements of all three of these models, and one way to evaluate citizenship in America is to look at what opportunities for each type of participation exist and whether citizens take advantage of them.

**Why does critical thinking feel like so much more work than “regular thinking”?**

To evaluate how democratic the United States is, we include in most chapters a section called The Citizens and . . . , which looks at the changing concept and practice of citizenship in this country with respect to the chapter’s subject matter. That feature looks at citizenship from many angles, considering the following types of questions: What role do “the people” have in American politics? How has that role expanded or diminished over time? What kinds of political participation do the rules of American politics (formal and informal) allow, encourage, or require citizens to take? What kinds of political participation are discouraged, limited, or forbidden? Do citizens take advantage of the opportunities for political action that the rules provide them? How do they react to the rules that limit their participation? How have citizens in different times exercised their rights and responsibilities? What do citizens need to do to keep the republic? How democratic is the United States?

To put all this in perspective, the book uses two features to give you a more concrete idea of what citizen participation might mean on a personal level. Profiles in Citizenship introduce you to individuals who have committed a good part of their lives to public service and focus on what citizenship means to those people and what inspired them to take on a public role. The Snapshots of America, described earlier, provide demographic data to bring the diversity of the American citizenry front and center and to highlight the difficulties inherent in uniting into a single nation individuals and groups with such different and often conflicting interests.

We have outlined several features that recur throughout this book. Remember that each is designed to help you to think critically about American politics, either by analyzing power in terms of who gets what, and how, or by evaluating citizenship to determine how well we are following Benjamin Franklin’s mandate to keep the republic.

**In Your Own Words** Apply the five steps of critical thinking to this book’s themes of power and citizenship in American politics.
THE BIG PICTURE:
How to Think Critically

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

ASK YOURSELF
- Where does this information come from?
- Who is the author?
- Who are they talking to?
- How do the source and the audience shape the author’s perspective?

LAY OUT THE ARGUMENT

ASK YOURSELF
- What argument is the author asking you to accept?
- If you accept the argument, what values are you also buying?
- Does the argument hold together logically?

UNCOVER THE EVIDENCE

ASK YOURSELF
- Did the author do research to back up the conclusions?
- Is there any evidence or data that is not provided that should be there?
- If there is no evidence provided, does there need to be?

OCEAN OF EXCUSES

 Arguments sound like conflict.
I hate conflict.

 Values are private.
It’s rude to pry.

 Logic gives me hives!
Data mean numbers.
Numbers freak me out.

BRIDGE to ENLIGHTENMENT

What, do I look like some kind of detective?
What argument is the author asking you to accept?

If you accept the argument, what values are you also buying?

Does the argument hold together logically?

I read it on the Internet. It must be true.

My parents always watch this TV station. Of course it's reliable.

Arguments sound logical. Logic gives me hives!

Values are private. It's rude to pry.

What, do I look like some kind of detective?

Data mean numbers. Numbers freak me out.

I don't like this person's values. Why should I care about their conclusions?

These ideas make me really uncomfortable. They don't click with anything I think I know. Time for a beer!

There is no way to know what conclusions are right.

Ouch! Thinking is hard work. Wake me up when it's over.

How would I know?

I don't like this person's values. Why should I care about their conclusions?

ASK YOURSELF

What difference does this argument make to your understanding of the political world?

How does it affect who gets what and how they get it?

Was getting this information valuable to you or did it waste your time?

ASK YOURSELF

What's the punch line here?

Did the author convince you that they are correct?

Does accepting the conclusion to this argument require you to change any of your ideas about the world?

ASK YOURSELF

Where does this information come from? Who is the author? Who are they talking to? How do the source and the audience shape the author's perspective?

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

Did the author do research to back up the conclusions? Is there any evidence or data that is not provided that should be there? If there is no evidence provided, does there need to be?
Let’s Revisit: What’s at Stake . . . ?

We began this chapter by looking at the power of hashtag activism in response to the phenomenal efforts of the Parkland students to change the prevailing narrative about guns, increase the involvement of young people in politics, and bring about political change. We asked whether Benjamin Franklin would consider such movements as fulfilling his admonishment to keep the republic. Since then, we have covered a lot of ground, arguing that politics is fundamental to human life and, in fact, makes life easier for us by giving us a nonviolent way to resolve disputes. We pointed out that politics is a method by which power and resources get distributed in society: politics is who gets what and how they get it. Citizens who are aware and involved stand a much better chance of getting what they want from the system than do those who check out or turn away. One clear consequence when young people disregard politics, then, is that they are far less likely to get what they want from the political system. This is exactly what happens.

But the hashtag activists we met in this chapter have been instrumental in changing the narrative of contemporary American politics. As Occupy protester Matt Brandi says:

The objective of Occupy was to change the direction of the national dialogue and debate. . . . By appearing in strong numbers and generating media interest (both new/social and commercial/mass), Occupy was able to influence the national dialogue. We protested about inequality and exploitation, the corruption of our government by wealth and influence; and while we did not make “demands,” people began to talk about inequality, exploitation, and the corruption of democracy. The very way people talked and thought about these issues changed.

What Brandi is suggesting was at stake for the Occupy protesters was, in the language of political scientists, agenda setting. A problem not defined as a problem, or not on the national agenda, cannot be solved by public action. It worked for the Occupy protestors who saw income inequality become a major issue between President Obama and his 2012 Republican challenger, Mitt Romney.

It was that effort to change the narrative, and to put real political effort behind it, that encouraged the kids involved in the March for Our Lives to spend the summer registering young people and getting them energized to vote for changes in gun laws. Although the gun laws remain stubbornly the same, the narrative has begun to change. Young people voted in huge numbers for a midterm election and the policy change is likely to follow the change in narrative.

In the same way, the It Gets Better Project helped change the narrative on both bullying and LGBTQ rights. In the years since the movement began in 2011, as more and more “mainstream” people have posted videos promising LGBTQ youth that it does indeed get better, the world in fact has gotten better. Certainly, the It Gets Better Project was not solely responsible for these changes, but in significant ways it helped change the narrative that made the changes possible.

And the debates over systemic racism and intersectionality from the 2016 election through the summer of 2020, at least on the Democratic side, make clear that Black Lives Matter has changed the narrative on race. President Obama was cautious about making race a centerpiece of his administration, but his presidency and the Black Lives Matter movement freed President Joe Biden to address it in a more comprehensive way.

These movements highlight the value of grassroots action, and the power of stepping outside the system to put pressure on the status quo to respond to unmet and even previously unvoiced needs. It might not have been what Benjamin Franklin had in mind, but occupying the republic may very well be another means of keeping it.
Excerpts from President Barack Obama’s Howard University commencement address

May 7, 2016

President Obama gave a moving address at Howard University his final spring in office, calling for the class of 2016 to be aware of how much the world had changed, how “if you had to choose one moment in history in which you could be born, and you didn’t know ahead of time who you were going to be—what nationality, what gender, what race, whether you’d be rich or poor, gay or straight, what faith you’d be born into—you wouldn’t choose 100 years ago. You wouldn’t choose the fifties, or the sixties, or the seventies. You’d choose right now. If you had to choose a time to be, in the words of Lorraine Hansberry, ‘young, gifted, and black’ in America, you would choose right now.” He offered graduates three pieces of advice: to be confident in the many ways there were to be black today, to be aware of the struggle that came before them and the structural racism that still pervades the system, and finally, this call for action.

You have to go through life with more than just passion for change; you need a strategy. I’ll repeat that. I want you to have passion, but you have to have a strategy. Not just awareness, but action. Not just hashtags, but votes.

You see, change requires more than righteous anger … . And I’m so proud of the new guard of black civil rights leaders who understand this. It’s thanks in large part to the activism of young people like many of you, from Black Twitter to Black Lives Matter, that America’s eyes have been opened—white, black, Democrat, Republican—to the real problems, for example, in our criminal justice system.

But to bring about structural change, lasting change, awareness is not enough. It requires changes in law, changes in custom. If you care about mass incarceration, let me ask you: How are you pressuring members of Congress to pass the criminal justice reform bill now pending before them? If you care about better policing, do you know who your district attorney is? Do you know who your state’s attorney general is? Do you know the difference? Do you know who appoints the police chief and who writes the police training manual? Find out who they are, what their responsibilities are. Mobilize the community, present them with a plan, work with them to bring about change, hold them accountable if they do not deliver. Passion is vital, but you’ve got to have a strategy.

And your plan better include voting—not just some of the time, but all the time. It is absolutely true that 50 years after the Voting Rights Act, there are still too many barriers in this country to vote. There are too many people trying to erect new barriers to voting. This is the only advanced democracy on Earth that goes out of its way to make it difficult for people to vote. And there’s a reason for that. There’s a legacy to that.

But let me say this: Even if we dismantled every barrier to voting, that alone would not change the fact that America has some of the lowest voting rates in the free world. In 2014, only 36 percent of Americans turned out to vote in the midterms—the second lowest participation rate on record. Youth turnout—that would be you—was less than 20 percent. Less than 20 percent. Four out of five did not vote. In 2012, nearly two in three African Americans turned out. And then, in 2014, only two in five turned out. You don’t think that made a difference in terms of the Congress I’ve got to deal with? And then people are wondering, well, how come Obama hasn’t gotten this done? How come he didn’t get that done? You don’t think that made a difference? What would have happened if you had turned out at 50, 60, 70 percent, all across this country? People try to make this political thing really complicated. Like, what kind of reforms do we need? And how do we need to do that? You know what, just vote. It’s math. If you have more votes than the other guy, you get to do what you want. It’s not that complicated.

And you don’t have excuses. You don’t have to guess the number of jellybeans in a jar or bubbles on a bar of soap to register to vote. You don’t have to risk your life to cast a ballot. Other people already did that for you. Your grandparents, your great grandparents might be here today if they were working on it. What’s your excuse? When we don’t vote, we give away our power, disenfranchise ourselves—right when we need to use the power that we have; right when we need your power to stop others from taking away the vote and rights of those more vulnerable than you are—the elderly and the poor, the formerly incarcerated trying to earn their second chance.

So you’ve got to vote all the time, not just when it’s cool, not just when it’s time to elect a President, not just when you’re inspired. It’s your duty. When it’s time to
elect a member of Congress or a city councilman, or a school board member, or a sheriff. That’s how we change our politics—by electing people at every level who are representative of and accountable to us. It is not that complicated. Don’t make it complicated.

And, finally, change requires more than just speaking out—it requires listening, as well. In particular, it requires listening to those with whom you disagree, and being prepared to compromise. When I was a state senator, I helped pass Illinois’s first racial profiling law, and one of the first laws in the nation requiring the videotaping of confessions in capital cases. And we were successful because, early on, I engaged law enforcement. I didn’t say to them, oh, you guys are so racist, you need to do something. I understood, as many of you do, that the overwhelming majority of police officers are good, and honest, and courageous, and fair, and love the communities they serve . . .

And I can say this unequivocally: Without at least the acceptance of the police organizations in Illinois, I could never have gotten those bills passed. Very simple. They would have blocked them.

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The point is, you need allies in a democracy . . . democracy requires compromise, even when you are 100 percent right. This is hard to explain sometimes. You can be completely right, and you still are going to have to engage folks who disagree with you. If you think that the only way forward is to be as uncompromising as possible, you will feel good about yourself, you will enjoy a certain moral purity, but you're not going to get what you want. And if you don’t get what you want long enough, you will eventually think the whole system is rigged. And that will lead to more cynicism, and less participation, and a downward spiral of more injustice and more anger and more despair. And that’s never been the source of our progress. That’s how we cheat ourselves of progress . . .

So don’t try to shut folks out, don’t try to shut them down, no matter how much you might disagree with them. There’s been a trend around the country of trying to get colleges to disinvite speakers with a different point of view, or disrupt a politician’s rally. Don’t do that—no matter how ridiculous or offensive you might find the things that come out of their mouths. Because as my grandmother used to tell me, every time a fool speaks, they are just advertising their own ignorance. Let them talk. Let them talk. If you don’t, you just make them a victim, and then they can avoid accountability.

That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t challenge them. Have the confidence to challenge them, the confidence in the rightness of your position. There will be times when you shouldn’t compromise your core values, your integrity, and you will have the responsibility to speak up in the face of injustice. But listen. Engage. If the other side has a point, learn from them. If they’re wrong, rebut them. Teach them. Beat them on the battlefield of ideas. And you might as well start practicing now, because one thing I can guarantee you—you will have to deal with ignorance, hatred, racism, foolishness, trifling folks. I promise you, you will have to deal with all that at every stage of your life. That may not seem fair, but life has never been completely fair. Nobody promised you a crystal stair. And if you want to make life fair, then you’ve got to start with the world as it is.

So that’s my advice. That’s how you change things. Change isn’t something that happens every four years or eight years; change is not placing your faith in any particular politician and then just putting your feet up and saying, okay, go. Change is the effort of committed citizens who hitch their wagons to something bigger than themselves and fight for it every single day.

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**Consider the source and the audience:** In the last year of his presidency, Obama is speaking to an audience at a black university that has graduated some notable political figures. He is tailoring his remarks to an African American audience. Is that the only audience he is speaking to? Who else might he expect to be listening?

**Lay out the argument and the underlying values and assumptions:** The part of the speech we focus on here is about the importance of taking action, going beyond the kind of hashtag activism we talked about early in this chapter. “Not just hashtags, but votes,” says Obama. What kind of democracy is he advocating here? What are the values that support democracy?

**Uncover the evidence:** In parts of the speech we had to cut for length, Obama gives many examples of people, primarily Howard grads, who were able to change the world they lived in by practicing the principles he calls for. Would that kind of anecdotal evidence be sufficient
to persuade you that he is right? He also draws on his own personal experience. Is that persuasive?

**Evaluate the conclusion**: Obama wants the class of 2016 to understand that they won’t get the change they seek in the world without taking action, especially voting and working with others. Are you persuaded? What alternatives might there be to effecting political change?

**Sort out the political significance**: What is the historical context in which Obama is writing? Did the Republicans he had to deal with in Congress practice democracy as he defines it? What would have been the political results if they had? What fate does he worry will befall movements like Black Lives Matter if they are not backed by action, hard work, and votes?

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**Review**

**Introduction**

The beauty of a democracy is that all the people get to fight for what they want. Not everyone can win, of course, and many never come close. There is no denying that some people bring resources to the process that give them an edge, and that the rules give advantages to some groups of people over others.

**What Is Politics?**

Politics may appear to be a grubby, greedy pursuit, filled with scandal and backroom dealing. In fact, despite its shortcomings and sometimes shabby reputation, politics is an essential means for resolving differences and determining how power and resources, including control of information through the creation of political narratives, are distributed in society. Politics is about who gets power and resources in society—and how they get them. Increasingly we get them through channels that are mediated, or controlled, by forces external to us.

Government, by contrast, is the system established for exercising authority over a group of people. In the United States, the government is embodied in the Constitution and the institutions set up by the Constitution. Government is shaped not only by politics but also by economics, which is concerned specifically with the distribution of wealth and society’s resources.

- **politics** (p. 4)
- **power** (p. 4)
- **media** (p. 4)
- **social order** (p. 4)
- **government** (p. 5)
- **authority** (p. 5)
- **legitimate** (p. 5)
- **rules** (p. 6)
- **norms** (p. 6)
- **institutions** (p. 6)
- **political narrative** (p. 6)
- **gatekeepers** (p. 7)
- **economics** (p. 7)
- **socialist economy** (p. 8)
- **substantive guarantees** (p. 8)
- **procedural guarantees** (p. 8)
- **capitalist economy** (p. 9)
- **laissez-faire capitalism** (p. 9)
- **mixed economies** (p. 9)
- **democratic socialism** (p. 9)
- **social democracy** (p. 9)
- **regulated capitalism** (p. 10)

**Political Systems and the Concept of Citizenship**

Political systems dictate how power is distributed among leaders and citizens, and these systems take many forms. Authoritarian governments give ultimate power to the state. Nonauthoritarian systems, like democracy, place power largely in the hands of the people. Democracy is based on the principle of popular sovereignty, giving the people the ultimate power to govern. The meaning of citizenship is key to the definition of democracy. Citizens are believed to have rights protecting them from government as well as responsibilities to the public realm.

- **authoritarian governments** (p. 10)
- **totalitarian** (p. 11)
- **authoritarian capitalism** (p. 11)
- **anarchy** (p. 11)
- **democracy** (p. 12)
- **popular sovereignty** (p. 12)
- **advanced industrial democracy** (p. 12)
- **communist democracy** (p. 13)
- **populism** (p. 13)
- **subjects** (p. 13)
- **citizens** (p. 13)
Origins of Democracy in America

Democracy was not an obvious choice for the founders—their decisions were based on their own intellectual heritage, their historical experience, and the theories about government that informed them.

divine right of kings (p. 14)  social contract (p. 14)
classical liberalism (p. 14)  republic (p. 17)

The Evolution of American Citizenship

At the time of our nation’s founding, two competing views of citizenship emerged. The first view, articulated by James Madison, sees the citizen as fundamentally self-interested; this view led the founders to fear too much citizen participation in government. The second view puts faith in citizens’ ability to act for the common good, to put their obligation to the public ahead of their own self-interest. Both views are still alive and well today, and we can see evidence of both sentiments at work in the mediated era, where citizenship is experienced not so much directly as through channels controlled by others. Ironically, this both limits our freedom and enhances our opportunities to take control.

digital native (p. 17)  public-interested citizenship (p. 17)  hashtag activism (p. 20)
meditated citizens (p. 17)  self-interested citizenship (p. 19)  information bubble (p. 20)

Thinking Critically About American Politics

In this textbook, we rely on two underlying themes to analyze how our American political system works, and to evaluate how well it works. The first theme is power, and how it functions in our system: we look at political events in terms of who the actors are, what they have to win or lose, and how the rules shape the way these actors engage in their struggle. The second theme is citizenship, specifically, how diverse citizens participate in political life to improve their own individual situations and to promote the interests of the community at large. Throughout this book, we will evaluate citizenship carefully as a means to determine how well the American system is working.