Politics is not some mysterious process engaged in by people beyond our reach. It is not something that happens “out there” and then impacts us, as if we were so many oblivious ducks, passively paddling around in our pond, targets of hunters we neither recognize nor understand.

Politics is simply the way we decide who gets power and influence in a world where there is not enough power for all of us to have as much as we’d like. As a famous political scientist, Harold Laswell, once defined it, politics is who gets what and how they get it. That sums it up neatly.

Most of our political wrangling is about trying to get rules that treat us or people like us favorably. Rules are incredibly important because they can help to determine who will win or lose future power struggles.

An essential element of power is having the ability to tell the controlling political narrative about who should have power, how it should be used, and to what end. Telling a political narrative, or a story about power, that other people buy into can give you enormous authority over them.

It can seem like a pretty grimy activity sometimes, but consider this: politics is what saves us from being like the other animals on the planet. It gives us ways to solve disputes over power that do not involve violence. Instead, we have options of bargaining, cooperating, collaborating, and compromising. Or even bribing and arm twisting and threatening to pull out of the process. We can resort to violence, and of course we do at times, but the key point is—we don’t have to!

By the time you finish reading this chapter, you will understand

- The basic definitions of politics, government, and economics
- The varieties of political and economic systems and how they help us understand the differences among nations, including the United States
- The ideas that underlie the U.S. political system and that bring us together
- The ideas that divide us despite our being bound by a common culture
How narratives can perpetuate particular ideas about politics and economics and how living in a mediated world helps to construct those narratives

The narratives about citizenship that provide the context in which we navigate politics in the United States

1.2 COMING TO TERMS: POLITICS, GOVERNMENT, AND ECONOMICS

Actually, no. The fact that politics is a process is what distinguishes it from government. Although we often use politics and government interchangeably, they are not the same thing.

We said earlier that politics is the process we use to decide who gets power and influence. Government, by contrast, is a system or an organization for exercising authority over a body of people. Authority is simply power that people consider legitimate, that is, they've consented or agreed to it. If people stop considering government's power to be legitimate (like the American colonists did with the British in the 1700s), they put themselves into a state of rebellion, or revolution against the government.

Politics and government are often used interchangeably because they are so closely related. The process of politics—fighting over rules and the power to make rules—can shape the kind of government we end up with. And the kind of government we establish—the rules and the institutions (or arenas for the exercise of power)—can in turn shape the way politics unfolds.

Politics produces different kinds of governments. The key differences among these governments relate to how much power government officials

- politics: the way we decide who gets power and influence in a world where there is not enough power for all of us to have as much as we’d like
- rules: political directives that help to determine who will win or lose future power struggles
- political narrative: a story that is used to persuade others about the nature of power, who should have it, and how it should be used
- government: a system or an organization for exercising authority over a body of people
- authority: power that people consider legitimate, that they have consented or agreed to

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have over how people live their lives and how much power individuals retain to push back against or criticize government.

At one end of the spectrum, government makes all decisions about how individuals live their lives and individuals are powerless to push back. At the other end, individuals make the decisions for themselves and government does not exist. Somewhere in the middle is a government that is ultimately controlled by the individuals who live under it and that has processes in place so individuals can challenge the government if they feel it has overreached its authority.

Here they are, ranging from most government power/least individual power to least government power/most individual power:

# Authoritarian governments are governments where the rulers have all of the power and the rules don’t allow the people who live under the rules to have any power at all. The people who live under authoritarian governments are called subjects because they are simply subject to the will of the rulers. They have no power of their own to fight back.

# Non-authoritarian governments are governments where the rules regulate the people’s behaviors in some respects (outlawing murder, theft, and running red lights, for instance) but allow them considerable freedom in others. The individuals who live under these governments are called citizens because government doesn’t have all the power over them—they retain some power or rights that government cannot take away and that they can use to push back against an encroaching government. Non-authoritarian governments can be democracies or constitutional monarchies or other arrangements where the power of the leaders over the people is limited in some respect.

# Democracy is a special case of non-authoritarian government because here the citizens have considerable power to make the rules

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**TYPES OF GOVERNMENTS OR POLITICAL SYSTEMS**

**authoritarian governments**: political systems in which the rulers have all of the power and the rules don’t allow the people who live under them to have any power at all

**subjects**: people who are bound to the will of the rulers and who have no power of their own to push back on an abusive government

**non-authoritarian governments**: political systems in which the rules regulate people’s behaviors in some respects but allow them considerable freedom in others

**citizens**: individuals who live under non-authoritarian governments

**democracy**: a type of non-authoritarian government wherein citizens have considerable power to make the rules that govern them
that govern them (based on a theory called popular sovereignty). The degree of that power may vary. In small democracies, citizens may make every decision that affects them. In large ones, they may only choose representatives who exercise power on their behalf. The point is that, in a democracy, collective decisions are made by counting individual preferences about what citizens believe to be best.

Anarchy is no government at all. Individuals are free to do as they wish. The absence of laws means that organizing and transferring power is difficult, if not impossible. We don’t have any lasting real-life examples of this type of government.

We can arrange these systems on a continuum of government power to individual power that looks like this:
Power and influence are not the only scarce resources we have disputes over, of course. We also fight over gold and treasure and Maseratis—that is, material stuff. The process for deciding who gets the material resources and how they get them is called **economics**.

Like politics, economics can also offer us an alternative to a life of violence and mayhem. If we decide to allow an economic system to make decisions about who gets how much stuff, then we will have a narrative to justify the things we have managed to claim as our own. There will be an agreed-upon distributive system that provides predictability and a story about who deserves what.

Politics and economics are closely related. As you can imagine, the more power you have, the easier it will be to push a narrative that gives you more stuff. The more stuff you have, the more power will come with it. It is really impossible to study politics divorced from economics.

Like political systems, economic systems can also vary depending on whether they rely on government power or individual choices to make decisions about the distribution of material goods. Kinds of economic systems include

- **Socialism.** Socialist systems are economic systems in which the government (a single ruler, a party, or some other empowered group) decides what to produce and who should get the products. Usually in a socialist system the state or the government owns the utilities, the factories, and other essential property (or, perhaps, all property). Government may decide that the goods produced should be distributed equally or according to need or only to a valued elite—the point is that who gets the goods is a political decision.
Socialism and communism can mean similar things. If you hear references to communism, it probably means something close to what we’ve described here. To simplify, we’ll just go with the term socialism in this book.

Regulated capitalism. Regulated capitalism is a modified form of capitalism, an economic system that relies on the market to make decisions about who should have material goods. The market is based on the decisions of multiple individuals about what to buy or sell, creating different levels of demand and supply. When the demand for something goes up, so does its cost until more of it is produced. If production keeps up until the good floods the market and demand is insufficient to buy all that’s been produced, then the price goes down.

As with democracy, in regulated capitalism, the fundamental decision-makers are individuals rather than the government. Also as in a democracy, individuals may decide they want the government to step in and regulate behaviors that they think are not in the public interest: the formation of monopolies that restrict competition, for instance, or wild swings that can happen when the market is uncontrolled.

Just what regulations are appropriate can be a major subject of political debate in democratic countries with capitalist systems.

Laissez-faire capitalism. Laissez-faire capitalism is what you have when there are no restrictions on the market at all. An unregulated market can be subject to wild swings up and down. Some people like to speculate in that environment, but it turns out most people with money want a little bit more stability and predictability when they invest. Governments also find it costly and difficult to deal with the public catastrophes that can result from market crashes (the Great Depression of the 1930s, for instance, or the Great Recession after the stock market bubble burst in 2008). Consequently, as with anarchy, laissez-faire systems exist in theory but are problematic in practice.

We can also arrange these economic systems on a continuum of more government power over economic decision making to more individual power over economic decision making:

- regulated capitalism: a market system in which the government intervenes to protect rights
- capitalism: an economic system that relies on the market to make decisions about who should have material goods
- market: the collective decisions of multiple individuals about what to buy or sell, creating different levels of demand and supply
- laissez-faire capitalism: a form of capitalism wherein there are no restrictions on the market at all
Note that both forms of capitalism are on the side of more individual power even though government might regulate the economy to achieve social goals, like using taxation to provide benefits for the disadvantaged or to provide universal education. Taxation is just one of the tools politicians might use to regulate the outcome of the market.

### 1.3 Political-Economic Systems

The advantage of looking at political and economic systems the way we laid them out in the preceding section is that it allows us to understand just how they are different from and similar to each other. And because all nations have a way to manage the distribution of power and material goods, if we layer the two figures from that section on top of each other, we can create a model that will help us understand where most countries are located.

Keep in mind that models are just that—they are not detailed depictions of reality. Instead, they focus on key attributes in order to show relationships or structure. *Models are just tools to help us understand.*

So, take a look. Here we have placed the vertical axis of politics (ranging from more individual control of how people live on the top to more government control toward the bottom) over the horizontal axis of economics (ranging from more individual control of how goods are distributed on the right to more government control on the left). What this creates are four quadrants where we can place most any political economic system in the world:
Think about the kinds of systems that fit into each of these quadrants:

# Capitalist democracy. The upper right quadrant includes countries with the most individual control over both political and economic life. These countries have democratic governments and capitalist economies, although they may be found in different parts of the quadrant depending on how much social and economic regulation they endorse.

The United States is in this quadrant, as are the countries of western Europe (although many European countries are willing to have more...
regulation of the economy to achieve valued social goals like less poverty or a narrower gap between rich and poor). Japan is also in this quadrant, as are India, Mexico, Canada, and many other nations that value individual choices over a heavy government hand.

**Totalitarianism.** Go catty-corner from capitalist democracy and you find totalitarianism. Totalitarian systems include authoritarian governments that tell people how to live and socialist economic systems where the government also decides who gets what material goods. Governments, not individuals, make the important decisions about power, influence, gold, and treasure.

Countries that fit in here are North Korea—and the former Soviet Union. These systems are hard to maintain because you need to keep your population isolated from the rest of the world.

**Authoritarian capitalism.** Countries in the lower right quadrant are some of the most interesting. These governments may pretend to have elections, but they are essentially a sham. Individuals have no rights to push back against a government that might determine how many children they can have or how they dress or grow their hair. They have no legal recourse or rights of due process if they are convicted of a crime. As far as how individuals live their lives, authoritarian government is the decider. But increasingly, these governments are choosing to let their subjects have some market freedom. Recognizing that global power is economic power, they take advantage of individual entrepreneurship to help drive their national economic engines.

Some authoritarian capitalist states have evolved from totalitarian systems (like Russia and China), and others were structured that way from the start. Singapore has an authoritarian government (at one time chewing gum was illegal because people threw their gum on the ground and defiled public spaces) but a thriving capitalist economy and tourist trade.

In 1994, eighteen-year-old American Michael Fay was convicted of spray painting cars in Singapore. He was arrested and sentenced to be caned. American claims that his punishment was totalitarianism: a system that combines authoritarian government with a socialist economic system wherein the government makes all the decisions about power, influence, and money

authoritarian capitalism: a system in which the authoritarian government has strong control over how individuals may live their lives, but individuals do have some market freedom
“cruel and unusual” left Singaporean authorities unmoved since they have no bill of rights that meaningfully limits government action. Bill Clinton’s administration was able to intervene to get the sentence somewhat reduced, but the example shows dramatically what it can be like to be in a thriving capitalist economy that doesn’t recognize civil liberties.

Note, however, that the evolution can go both ways. Democratic countries can turn in an authoritarian direction, often through populist movements led by strong, charismatic figures. We see that today in Venezuela, the Philippines, Turkey, and Brazil. In recent years, populist movements that feed on a sense of grievance in the population are also picking up steam in Europe and the United States.

Marxist utopia. This quadrant is tough to describe because there are no real-life examples of what a Marxist utopia looks like. These countries would have extremely free citizens who could choose to live their lives as they please, but not a market economy. The closest we can come to imagining life in this type of system is the society the German theorist Karl Marx thought would emerge after workers had overthrown the capitalist system in a revolution (an event he thought was inevitable but that so far has not happened). After revolution, Marx thought the state would wither away and the economy would operate by requiring that individuals participate according to their ability and receive goods according to their need. Like so many places of imaginary perfection, this one has never survived in the bright sunlight of reality.

American Political Culture

Our increasingly media-rich culture gives us many opportunities to hear and participate in political debates, both civil and not so civil. Sometimes it seems like we don’t agree on a single thing. But, ironically, it is only because we do agree on some fundamentals that those disagreements can even take place.

Political culture is a set of shared ideas, values, and beliefs that define the role and limitations of government and people’s relationship to that government and that, therefore, bind people into a single political unit.
government. Because they are shared values and beliefs, they pull people together, making them into a single political unit. Here are four things to know about political culture:

## Political culture is woven together from political narratives. It is not identical to political narratives, however; political narratives can both unite people and divide them.

## Political culture is intangible and unspoken. It is very hard to get your hands around it or to find the language with which to discuss it. It is especially difficult to be aware of your own political culture. Like the semi-facetious question of whether fish know they are in water, it is interesting to ask whether people recognize their own political cultures if they have never been exposed to another. People who have not traveled or met many people from other countries are more likely to think that the beliefs we share are objective reality, not just one set of many optional sets of narratives.

## Political culture is easiest to see when you can step outside of it. Like a fish in water, it is hard to be aware of your environment when you are immersed in it and it's all you have ever known. That is one reason we created the world systems graphic we explored earlier. It allows us to understand our system in relation to others as a first step to understanding the culture that holds it together.

## Political culture gives people a common set of assumptions about the world and a common political language within which they can disagree. And boy, do they disagree! Remember that to say that Americans share a political culture is not to say that they agree on everything.

### What does American political culture look like?

What does American political culture look like? We know from the world systems graphic that our political culture is found in the upper right quadrant of that figure—defined by a preference for more individual control (that is, less government regulation) of how people live their lives and how they distribute material goods. That means Americans are democratic capitalists whose values are the same Enlightenment values of classical liberalism (which we discuss in the next section).

Within that quadrant there is a fair amount of variation. We said, for instance, that many western European cultures endorse more regulation to bring about valued social goods like a basic standard of living, guaranteed health care, or more equality. The United States is less likely to agree on that kind of regulation (even deciding whether to guarantee access to health care is
Chapter 1: Politics and Citizenship

a struggle here). Here are the fundamentals on which Americans seem to have reached a national consensus:

- **Limited government** (this goes all the way back to the founding)
- **Individualism**, which means an emphasis on individual rights rather than on the collective whole
- **A belief in core values of freedom, equality, and representative democracy**, in a context of minimal government coercion, so that . . .

  - **Freedom** becomes freedom *from* government. That is different, for instance, from some other democratic capitalist countries whose citizens view their freedom as flowing from a strong government that provides basics like medical care and higher education. This gives citizens a level of financial freedom that allows them to focus their time and money elsewhere.

  - **Equality** becomes equality before the law; one person, one vote; and equal opportunity—all forms of equality that require minimal government intervention. Americans tend to reject notions of equality like those realized by affirmative action, in which government steps in to create more actual equality of life chances.

  - **Democracy** is a decision-making process by which individuals register their preferences for their rulers (and the policies they promise). Democratic capitalism cannot exist without a commitment to a form of democratic choice by individuals.

The thing about political cultures is that they are not eternal. Consensus on the basic elements can weaken, and without a common culture it is hard to maintain national unity. Once a substantial number of colonial Americans had begun to see themselves as a separate people and developed a distinctly

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**Limited government**: the Enlightenment idea that the power of government should be restricted to allow for maximum individual freedom

**Individualism**: a political cultural emphasis on individual rights rather than on the collective whole

**Freedom**: in American political culture, individual independence *from* government

**Equality**: in American political culture, forms of political fairness that require minimal government intervention
American political culture, union with the British was hard to maintain. Not all Americans shared the desire to break from England, but eventually the cultural, political, and economic forces prevailed and they severed their ties.

Political culture is a gift: it gives Americans the ability to disagree, within bounds, but also the ability to be united when necessary. The challenge is to make sure that differences among citizens do not become so extreme that the political culture can no longer contain them.

1.5 AMERICAN POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

Of course, within the cultural framework of the United States there is plenty of room for disagreement. How limited should government be? How much government regulation should be allowed? How much individualism should citizens endorse? Does government have any role in providing for freedom, education, and equality? Should strongly held ideas, ones that people believe are absolutely true, be enshrined in government policy, or should government allow the maximum range for individual conscience? How much freedom, equality, and democracy should people have, and what should government’s role be in guaranteeing it?

The disagreements that citizens have about those sorts of questions are about the boundaries and meaning of the shared political culture. We call the competing narratives we create to explain those disagreements ideologies.

The typical ideological division in the United States has been on the left–right economic dimension, with conservatives on the right calling for less regulation of the economy (lower taxes, freer trade, more competition, to name a few) and liberals on the left calling for more government regulation (like social welfare programs, universal health care, and free preschool programs).

Over the past century, that economic dimension emerged as the most salient because, in the years after the Great Depression of the 1930s, just making a living was a major concern for people.

ideologies: competing narratives that explain various political disagreements
conservatives: Americans on the political right who believe in less regulation of the economy
liberals: Americans on the political left who believe in greater government regulation of the economy
Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, however, other noneconomic issues started to motivate voters—issues like racial desegregation; civil rights; women’s rights, including reproductive rights; prayer in schools; and crime reduction.

These issues split Americans along a political dimension much like the vertical line we considered earlier, with some Americans saying that government should allow the maximum freedom for all people, regardless of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, and others saying it was government’s job to enforce a proper, traditional social order.

When you combine the horizontal, economic ideological dimension with the vertical, political ideological dimension, you get four ideological categories that are important for understanding American politics today:

**ECONOMIC LIBERALS**
- Favor social welfare, universal health care, maximum rights for all regardless of race, religion or creed, or sexual orientation

**SOCIAL LIBERALS**
- Favor social welfare, universal health care, maximum rights for all including government action via affirmative action, censorship, and other policies to ensure social equality

**ECONOMIC CONSERVATIVES**
- Favor lower taxes, limited government regulation, maximum rights for all regardless of race, religion or creed, or sexual orientation

**SOCIAL CONSERVATIVES**
- Favor lower taxes, limited government regulation, government enforcement of a traditional hierarchical social order and religious values
Let's take a closer look at each of these:

# Economic conservatives. These are the people who believe in the narrative that the government that governs best, governs least. They have a fundamental distrust in the government's ability to solve complex problems (President Ronald Reagan once said that the scariest words in the English language were “I am from the government and I’m here to help”) and a deep faith in individual ingenuity to do so. They favor getting government out of the boardroom (economic decisions) and out of the bedroom (decisions of personal morality).

In terms of policy, economic conservatives are close to being libertarians (those who believe in minimal government) when it comes to social issues. Consequently, they tend to favor policies like gun rights, reproductive rights, civil rights, assisted suicide, and legalized marijuana. They are equally libertarian when it comes to economic issues. Although they generally endorse taxation to provide basic police security and military defense, they are more likely to believe that government should leave many of the other things it currently does (collecting and doling out Social Security and health care benefits, road building, managing the penal system, space exploration, etc.) to the private sector. They are pro-immigration to add to the pool of workers and entrepreneurs. Most want only as much regulation of the economy as it would take to keep competition fair and the market from tanking.

# Economic liberals. The economic liberal narrative is also founded on the notion that citizens should be able to decide how to live their lives. Where it diverges from the economic conservative narrative is, first, in seeing citizens not just as individuals but as members of groups, some of whom are often not treated equitably by society, and, second, in believing government action may be necessary for all people to reach their full potential. As you would guess, economic liberals don’t distrust the government nearly as much as economic conservatives do. They see it as a tool that can be used wisely or foolishly.

Thus, they favor an expansion of civil rights protections—the elimination of racism and the expansion of immigration, women’s rights, and gay

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economic conservatives: Americans who favor a strictly procedural government role in the economy and the social order
libertarians: Americans who favor a minimal government role in any sphere
economic liberals: Americans who favor an expanded government role in the economy but a limited role in the social order
rights. That means they oppose restrictions on voting rights, penal codes that disproportionately jail people of color, and amendments prohibiting reproductive rights or marriage equality. Economic liberals are very libertarian when it comes to whether individuals get to call their own shots, but their narrative says that for individuals to reach their potential, they might need a boost from the government.

Consequently, economic liberals favor economic policies to provide a basic standard of living to all individuals. They support Social Security, Medicare (health care for the elderly), and universal health care, although they disagree on the form it ought to take. They believe in free college education or at least in requiring favorable terms for student loans. They support free lunch programs, free preschools, and free prenatal care to be sure kids from all backgrounds get a good start in life. They are pro-immigration and pro-diversity for its own sake. They support environmental regulation and using government to provide infrastructure (roads, bridges, dams) to improve life and to provide jobs. Those farthest along the left continuum are referred to as progressives, or economic liberals who believe in an even stronger role for the state in creating equality.

**Social conservatives.** These people are economically conservative but are often not as far to the right on that continuum as economic conservatives. Many support Social Security and Medicare and even the Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”), but they often see the allocation of those resources as having to do with “deservingness,” where some have rightly earned those benefits and others have taken advantage of the system unfairly. What distinguishes these folks from most other Americans is that their narratives put a priority on government preserving a traditional social order. They see government playing a strong role in creating and enforcing laws that curtail social behaviors they view as corrosive to society.

For some people who have strong beliefs that their vision of the social order (that is, how people should live their lives) reflects absolute truth, it is not unreasonable that they would want to put that vision into law. Social conservatives include several groups who feel that way about their world view. Traditionally, evangelical Christians have believed that the United States is a Judeo-Christian nation (instead

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**progressives:** economic liberals who believe in a stronger role for the state in creating equality

**social conservatives:** Americans who endorse limited government control of the economy but considerable government intervention to realize a traditional social order; based on religious values and hierarchy rather than equality
of one based on religious freedom) and that its laws should flow from that tradition. Consistent with this perspective are the views that abortion and birth control should be outlawed, prayer should be allowed in school, and marriage equality should be illegal.

Non-Christians can also have concrete ideas about the way people should live. Those who believe that society has a natural hierarchy—whether one that puts men or whites at the top of the heap, or, often, both—also believe there is a particular order that the law should promote. Remember that social conservatives fall in the lower right quadrant—that is, in the less democratic, more authoritarian ideological category. Individual choice is less important than is following an authoritarian leader who endorses their views on the social order.

Social liberals. This is a pretty small category in the United States. If you think about it, a country whose culture is in the upper right quadrant (economic conservatives) is less likely to have a lot of ideological commitment to a narrative that endorses both strong government responsibility for the economy and how people live their lives. Social liberals hold views like those of economic liberals on the economy—believing government should intervene to create more opportunity for all individuals and groups.

But social liberals also have concrete ideas about what they think is right, and they don’t mind stepping on civil liberties if they need to in order to realize them. If speech is offensive, it should be silenced; if pornography encourages objectification of women, it should be censored. Social liberals also support a lot of science-based regulations that other groups might support including those who don’t buy many elements of social liberal ideology. A wide swath of Americans accept environmental regulations or practices like requiring recycling or repurposing, all of which, after all, involve government telling people how to live their lives in accordance with a particular view of the world—probably because that view of the world is based on widely accepted science, not a particular religion or tradition. Similarly, people outside of this quadrant accept protective regulations like seat belt and helmet laws and food and drug regulations, even though these regulations infringe on individual

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social liberals: Americans who favor greater control of the economy and the social order to bring about greater equality and to regulate the effects of progress
liberties, because they accept as fact that they save people’s lives and lower medical costs. Still, as a whole, the social liberal quadrant doesn’t grab a lot of adherents because it pushes the limits of Americans’ limited government, individualistic culture.

Political activists may be deeply wedded to their political beliefs. Surely you have that uncle who shows up at the Thanksgiving table firmly fixed in his beliefs and who makes everyone else painfully aware of them. The reason crotchety uncles stand out is that—as you can see in the central circle in the American ideologies graphic—most Americans are in the middle of the ideological scheme. They may be socially liberal on some issues, economically conservative on others. Politics is not equally salient, or relevant, to everyone’s lives, so lots of people just ignore it until an election (or Thanksgiving) rolls around. It is true that in recent years Americans have gotten more tribal—more likely to want to hang out with other people who share their views—but for many people these categories are just not personally relevant.

In Chapter 7, on political parties and interest groups, we talk about where these groups fall along the contemporary political spectrum in the United States and how they got there. Here is the short version: At least since the Great Depression, Republicans have traditionally been the party of economic conservatives. Economic liberals were Democrats, the party of President Franklin Roosevelt, whose “New Deal” launched massive new social programs and projects to get the economy on its feet. Plenty of social conservatives followed Roosevelt into the New Deal, but in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Democrats became the party of civil rights under Lyndon Johnson, southern social conservatives split off to the Republican Party.

It’s been an uneasy alliance for the Republicans, to house those with libertarian and authoritarian values in one party. They are still trying to find their way through the contradictions inherent in that pairing. Democrats have their own disputes, but they occur mostly within the upper left quadrant (economic liberals), not across quadrants like the Republicans. Theoretically, that should make disputes easier for Democrats to solve, and it’s true that the party hasn’t been torn apart by internal fighting since the 1970s. No parties are closely aligned with the social liberals. The closest is probably the Green Party, although what they stand for seems to vary with the person heading the ticket.
With apologies to The Who (a brilliant rock group prominent from the mid-1960s until the early 1980s), in this series of boxes in each chapter we are talkin’ ’bout your generation.

Why? Because opinions about public issues are distinctly and measurably different among members of different generations—that is, people who were born within the same general time period and share life experiences that help shape their political views. Knowing how different generations think about political issues gives us insight into why certain people are likely to vote the way they do, why politicians make different kinds of policy appeals to different groups, and even what the future of American politics might look like.

Knowing how your own generation experiences American politics can help place your own values and opinions among your peers.

There is no universal agreement on what the political generations are—the exact year they start and when they end. Members of the Greatest Generation fought in World War II, the Silent Generation built the country to postwar prosperity, the Baby Boomers were the hippies and the people who hated the hippies, Gen Xers were the ones without a name who came after the Boomers, and the Millennials (most of you probably fit here or in the next group) were the ones born from about 1980 to the mid-1990s. The post-Millennials, or iGen, or Gen Z, are those of you just picking up where the Millennials left off without a clear identity, except, perhaps, for the distinction that you are the first generation to have lived your whole life with a screen in your hand.

**Who You Are: Generations Defined (by Pew Research Center)**

Take a minute to study the graphs below and think about the major differences you spot.

One of the reasons the generations have such different opinions is that they live in different worlds. The data in the next graph show that the life of a person aged 25 to 34 has not improved in material ways in the past forty years—and in some ways it is substantially worse. Life for some young Americans must feel...
like it did for Alice in Wonderland: “it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.”

**BREAKDOWN OF HOW PEW DEFINES EACH GENERATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENERATION</th>
<th>BORN</th>
<th>AGE IN 2018</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF ADULT POPULATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-Millennials</td>
<td>1997 through the present</td>
<td>18–21</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen X</td>
<td>1965–1980</td>
<td>38–53</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>1946–1964</td>
<td>54–72</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Generation and Greatest Generation</td>
<td>1901–1945</td>
<td>73 and older</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1.5: THE NATION’S GROWING DIVERSITY REFLECTED IN ITS YOUNGER GENERATIONS**

% of each generation who are . . .

- **White**
- **Hispanic**
- **Black**
- **Asian**
- **Other**

**MILLENIAL** 56%

- White: 21%
- Hispanic: 13%
- Black: 7%
- Asian: 3%

**GEN X** 61%

- White: 18%
- Hispanic: 12%
- Black: 7%
- Asian: 2%

**BOOMER** 72%

- White: 11%
- Hispanic: 11%
- Black: 5%
- Asian: 2%

**SILENT** 79%

- White: 8%
- Hispanic: 8%
- Black: 5%
- Asian: 1%

America is becoming more diverse. Whites have gone from making up 79 percent of the adult population to only 56 percent. Pew projects that by 2065 there will be no single racial or ethnic majority in the United States. How is that likely to change power politics in the US?

Younger generations are increasingly diverse, but less well off financially, less likely to be married, and less likely to own a home. What does that mean for them down the line?

Pew projects Millennials will be the largest generation in 2019. How will a country dominated by Millennials differ from one led by Boomers?

While older generations tend to be more conservative and have shown little ideological change over time, Gen Xers and Millennials especially have gotten increasingly more liberal in the past few years. In what ways might being liberal, an ideology that sees a role for government in improving people’s standards of living, be tied to the diversity and socioeconomic plight of younger Americans? How might it reflect their diversity?
This section of the chapter is about the power of narratives, but it is also about the ways we receive them and create them—the channels through which they are disseminated to us and by us. It is about the media through which information passes.

Just as 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. 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. People in power might tell narratives motivated by greed and the wish for personal glory.

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 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.

In every one of the political-economic systems we have been discussing, people with opposing views struggle mightily to control the political narrative about who should have power, how it should be used, and to what end. Controlling the political narrative can give people a great deal of authority over others.

In authoritarian governments, the narrative is not open to debate. The rulers set the narrative and control the flow of information so that it supports their version of why they should have power. Subjects of these governments accept the narrative, either because they haven’t been exposed to alternatives in the absence of free media or communication with the outside world (think North Korea) or out of fear (think Russia). Authoritarian rulers often use punishment to coerce uncooperative subjects into obedience.

Authoritarianism used to be a lot easier to pull off. In the Middle Ages and earlier, when few people could read, maintaining a single narrative about power that enforced authoritarian rule was relatively simple. For instance, as we see in the next chapter, the narrative of the divine right of kings kept monarchs in Europe on their thrones by declaring that those rulers were God’s representatives on earth.

media: channels of communication
Because most people then were illiterate, that narrative was passed to people through select and powerful channels that could shape and influence it. It was mediated by the human equivalent of the pipes we mentioned earlier. Information flowed mostly through medieval clergy and monarchs, the very people who had a vested interest in getting people to believe it.

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. The European Age of Enlightenment (1685–1815) gave voice to the multiple narratives about power that weakened the hold of the traditional, authoritarian monarch.

The narratives of classical liberalism that emerged from the Enlightenment emphasized individual rights, and non-authoritarianism. (Note: “liberalism” in this context does not mean the same as “liberalism” today.)

One of the key classical liberal narratives was that of the social contract, a story that said power is not derived from God, but from the consent of the governed. Philosopher John Locke’s version of the social contract was that people have natural rights and give up some of those in order to have the convenience of government. However, they retain enough of those rights to rebel against that government if it fails to protect them. In order for it to work, the social contract requires that people have the freedom to criticize the government (that is, to create counternarratives) and also the protection of the channels through which information and narratives could flow (like a press free of influence by those in power).

As we will see in the next chapter, 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 those rights were violated by the British, and was designed to combat the British narrative that America should remain part of its colonial empire.

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classical liberalism: an Enlightenment philosophy emphasizing individual freedom and self-rule

social contract: the idea that power is not derived from God but instead comes from and is limited by the consent of the governed, who can revolt against the government they contract with if their rights are not protected if the contract is not kept
Even at the time of the founding, literacy among average citizens was very limited. Political elites still played a major role in mediating information, but new channels also started to play a part—newspapers, pastors, and publishers all began to shape narratives.

Even though Americans today still largely adhere to the basic governing narrative the founders promoted, the country is now light years removed from their era, when communication was limited by illiteracy and the scarcity of channels through which it could pass.

Consider this timeline of the development of the media through which we get information, receive narratives, and send out our own information.
A revolution like the one fought by the Americans against the British would look entirely different in today’s highly mediated culture. But remember, it is because of the revolution they fought and the narrative of a free press that followed (and of course enormous technological development) that the mediated world we live in today is even possible. It is not possible in places like North Korea that isolate their subjects from information, or places like Russia that weaponize social media and kill journalists who are critical of the government.

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 almost entirely mediated. That is, most of our relationships, our education, our news, our travel, our sustenance, our purchases, our daily activities, our job seeking—our very sense of ourselves—are influenced by, experienced through, or shared via electronic media. If not for Apple, Google, Facebook, and Amazon, how different would our lives be? How much more directly would we need to interact?

We are conducting our lives through channels that, like the pipe we mentioned earlier, may be made of lead, may be rusty, or may be full of holes. When we do an online search, certain links are on top according to the calculations made by the search engine we use. When we shop online, certain products are urged on us (and then haunt our online life). When we travel, certain flights and hotels are flagged, and when we use social media, certain posts appear while others don’t. No one checks very hard to be sure that the information they receive isn’t emerging from the cyber equivalent of lead pipes.

Living mediated lives 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.

digital natives: people who 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”
1.7 MEDIATED CITIZENSHIP

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.

After the Constitution had been written, so the story goes, a woman accosted Benjamin Franklin as he was leaving the building where the founders were working. “What have you created?” she asked. “A republic, madam, if you can keep it,” he replied.

The mediated world we live in gives us myriad new ways to keep the republic and also some pretty high-tech ways to lose it. That puts a huge burden on us as mediated citizens—as people who are constantly receiving information through channels that can and do shape our political views—and also opens up a world of opportunity.

Among the things we are divided on in this country is what it means to be a citizen. We know what citizens are: they are people who live under a non-authoritarian government that gives them rights to push back against government action and even to overthrow it if it doesn’t protect their rights. Anyone born in the United States is a citizen, as are people born to Americans living abroad. There are also various ways for those not born here or to American parents to become naturalized citizens if they arrive legally and follow the procedure that the law lays out.

But once you are a citizen, born or naturalized, what is your role? James Madison had ideas about this. He thought people would be so filled with what he called “republican virtue” that they would put country ahead of self. (Again notice that “republican” does not mean what it means today.)

mediated citizens: people who are constantly receiving information through multiple channels that can and do shape their political views but who also have the ability to use those channels to create their own narratives

naturalized citizens: people who become U.S. citizens through a series of procedures that the law lays out
That is, they would readily put aside their self-interest to advance the public interest. As we will see in the next chapter, this public-interested citizenship proved not to be the rule, much to Madison’s disappointment. Instead most people demonstrated self-interested citizenship, trying to use the system to get whatever 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.

Today we have that same conflict. There are plenty of people who put country first—who enlist in the armed services, sometimes giving their lives for their nation, 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 up the ladder of opportunity. Especially in moments of national trouble—when the World Trade Center was attacked in September 2001, for instance—Americans willingly help their fellow citizens.

At the same time, the day-to-day business of life turns most people inward. Many 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” to “ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country,” but only a rare few have the time or motivation to take up that challenge.

The world today is not the same world that Madison wrote about or designed a government 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. 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 want to know why you are not on Facebook.

But younger, more media savvy digital natives—iGens, Millennials, GenXers, and even some tech-savvy Baby Boomers—not only have access

**WHAT DOES CITIZENSHIP LOOK LIKE IN TODAY’S MEDIATED WORLD?**

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**public-interested citizenship:** citizens who put country ahead of self by putting aside their self-interest to advance the public interest

**self-interested citizenship:** citizens who are focused on their personal lives and use the political system to maximize their interests

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to traditional media, if they choose, but also are accustomed to interacting, conducting friendships and family relationships, 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. We will be following these new patterns of mediated citizenship in the Generation Gap (Gen Gap) boxes you will find in each chapter.

In fact, 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 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.

An intensely mediated world does not automatically produce public-interested citizens. People can easily remain self-interested in this world. We can custom program our social media to give us only news and information that confirms what we already think. We can live in an information bubble where our narratives get reinforced by everything we see and hear. 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 uses social media to influence an election, as the Russians did in 2016. 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. For Madison, even public-interested 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.
Here’s just one example of how mediated citizenship has upset the founders’ applecart. At a time when basic political norms—the unspoken, unwritten ideas that support the U.S. Constitution and give structure to democratic government—are being challenged as never before, millions of high school students and their supporters recently took to the streets to challenge one of the richest, most powerful groups in America for control of the national narrative on gun safety.

As these young people transfer that battle from the street to the ballot box, they are following in the footsteps of multiple groups who have fought for their rights in American politics. The U.S. government was not born perfect, but it has proved over time to be an ideal open to the efforts of its citizens to perfect it, to become closer to the inspiring image that President Reagan liked to quote: “the shining city upon a hill.”

Whether you agree with the students’ political activism or not (and there are many people on both sides of the issue), the fact that high school students could organize and execute such a movement is a pretty impressive testimony to their own political and digital savvyness. It also demonstrates that despite the founders’ misgivings about popular government, they gave us a constitutional framework that is strong, adaptable, long lived, and open to citizen action. It has seen the country through a lot.

As the ability of ordinary citizens to create narratives has grown and as the media disseminate them widely, we regularly see and have to evaluate or even participate in these battles about issues that are deeply important to Americans. Throughout this book we will encounter conflicting narratives that define some of our greatest divisions. Read these narratives carefully. Would you frame any of them differently?

Mediated citizens are not only TV-watching couch surfers in the information bubble receiving and passing on narratives from powerful people. 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.

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**norms**: unspoken, unwritten ideas that support the U.S. Constitution and give structure to democratic government
Big Think

- Have the advances in media made us freer or less free to create our own stories?
- Can you make a case for authoritarian over democratic values? What would it look like?
- What kinds of things could destroy a political culture, and what would be the result?

Key Terms

CONCEPTS

- anarchy (p. 5)
- authoritarian capitalism (p. 10)
- authoritarian governments (p. 4)
- authority (p. 3)
- capitalism (p. 7)
- capitalist democracy (p. 9)
- classical liberalism (p. 24)
- democracy (p. 4)
- economics (p. 6)
- equality (p. 13)
- freedom (p. 13)
- generations (p. 20)
- government (p. 3)
- hashtag activism (p. 29)
- ideologies (p. 14)
- individualism (p. 13)
- information bubble (p. 29)
- laissez-faire capitalism (p. 7)
- limited government (p. 13)
- market (p. 7)
- media (p. 23)
- non-authoritarian governments (p. 4)
- norms (p. 30)
- political culture (p. 11)
- political narrative (p. 2)
- politics (p. 2)
- popular sovereignty (p. 5)
- public-interested citizenship (p. 28)
- regulated capitalism (p. 7)
- rules (p. 2)
- self-interested citizenship (p. 28)
- socialism (p. 6)
- totalitarianism (p. 10)

KEY INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

- citizens (p. 4)
- conservatives (p. 14)
- digital natives (p. 26)
- economic conservatives (p. 16)
- economic liberals (p. 16)
- liberals (p. 14)
- libertarians (p. 16)
- mediated citizens (p. 27)
- naturalized citizens (p. 27)
- progressives (p. 17)
- social conservatives (p. 17)
- social liberals (p. 18)
- subjects (p. 4)