CHAPTER 1

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FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. How is the American government affected by increasing globalization?
2. How does government serve its citizens?
3. What are the critical values, conflicts, and political ideologies that affect the decisions and policies made by the American government?
4. What criteria can we use to determine if our government is democratic?
5. What are the challenges of establishing and sustaining true democratic governments around the world?

The Great Depression of the 1930s was sparked by the collapse of the stock market in October 1929. Soon afterward, the nation’s banks began to fail—more than 1,000 each year and an estimated 4,000 in 1933 alone.\(^1\) Unemployment rose from 3 percent of the labor force before the collapse to almost 25 percent in 1933 and remained high for years, averaging nearly 18 percent from 1930 to 1940.\(^2\) Unemployment was still almost 10 percent in 1941, until World War II put people to work at national defense.

The Great Recession of our era technically began in December 2007 when employers’ payroll employment declined.\(^3\) But the subprime mortgage market began to collapse months earlier. By the summer of 2008, the nation’s financial institutions neared widespread failure, the stock market plunged, and the entire economy was in crisis. The term Great Recession was in use by December.\(^4\) Unemployment approached levels of the 1930s.\(^5\)

The official unemployment rate, which counts only people looking for work, rose from 4.8 percent in December 2007 to 10.2 percent in October 2009. Counting those who gave up looking, 17.3 percent of the population was unemployed in December 2009.\(^6\) Despite the hardships suffered by millions of Americans in the Great Recession, the Great Depression was worse.\(^7\)

What can government do to end such intense economic downturns? Should it do anything at all?

On March 5, 1933, the day after his inauguration, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt proclaimed a four-day bank holiday, suspending “all transactions in the Federal Reserve and other banks, trust companies, credit unions, and building and loan associations.” On March 9, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Emergency Banking Relief Act, which gave the president control over financial transactions, permitted the Treasury Department to decide which banks could reopen, and effectively
placed the government in control of the banking industry. Most economists credit Roosevelt’s unprecedented use of government power with stopping the run on banks, thus preventing citizens from withdrawing even more of their deposits and preventing further collapse of financial institutions.

President George W. Bush’s administration used government power to forestall a collapse of the home mortgage market in 2008. On Sunday, September 7, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson announced the takeover of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, two private companies responsible for most of the nation’s new home mortgages. Two weeks later, Secretary Paulson along with Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke announced a $700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) to buy out failing banks and automobile companies. Some described their actions as socialism, not capitalism. Nevertheless, the nation avoided a financial collapse akin to the 1930s.

President Barack Obama inherited Bush’s $700 billion TARP program and embarked on his own $787 billion economic stimulus program to improve the economy. It funded tax cuts; benefits for unemployment, education, and health care; and job creation through contracts, grants, and loans. Unemployment continued to rise in the months after its passage, but the economy actually grew by the end of 2009, and economists credited the stimulus program. Still, a poll in mid-January 2010 found more people disapproved than approved of Obama’s handling of the economy. People worried about federal spending, the growing deficit, and government’s role in the economy in general. Clobbered by imports of foreign glass (particularly from China), one West Virginia glassmaker said, “I need some relief from government to stay in business, but I’m not sure it is the government’s role to keep me in business.”

What do you think? Should government spend billions to stabilize the financial system and to combat unemployment when taxpayers must bear the burden?

Our main interest in this text is the purpose, value, and operation of government as practiced in the United States. We probe the relationship between individual freedoms and personal security, and how government ensures security by establishing order through making and enforcing its laws. We also examine the relationship between individual freedom and social equality as reflected in government policies, which often confront underlying dilemmas such as these. As the worried West Virginia glassmaker indicates, however, we live in an era of globalization—a term for the increasing interdependence of citizens and nations across the world. So we must consider how politics at home and abroad interrelate—which is increasingly important to understanding our government.

We hope to improve your understanding of the world by analyzing the norms, or values, that people use to judge political events. Our purpose is not to preach what people ought to favor in making policy decisions; it is to teach what values are at stake.

Teaching without preaching is not easy; no one can completely exclude personal values from political analysis. But our
approach minimizes the problem by concentrating on the dilemmas that confront governments when they are forced to choose between important policies that threaten equally cherished values, such as freedom of speech and personal security.

A prominent scholar defined politics as “the authoritative allocation of values for a society.” Every government policy reflects a choice between conflicting values. All government policies reinforce certain values (norms) at the expense of others. We want you to interpret policy issues (for example, should assisted suicide go unpunished?) with an understanding of the fundamental values in question (freedom of action versus order and protection of life) and the broader political context (liberal or conservative politics).

By looking beyond the specifics to the underlying normative principles, you should be able to make more sense out of politics. Our framework for analysis does not encompass all the complexities of American government, but it should help your knowledge grow by improving your comprehension of political information. We begin by considering the basic purposes of government. In short, why do we need it?

**The Globalization of American Government**

Most people do not like being told what to do. Fewer still like being coerced into acting a certain way. Yet billions of people in countries across the world willingly submit to the coercive power of government. They accept laws that state on which side of the road to drive, what constitutes a contract, how to dispose of human waste—and how much they must pay to support the government that makes these coercive laws.

In the first half of the twentieth century, people thought of government mainly in territorial terms. Indeed, a standard definition of government was the legitimate use of force—including firearms, imprisonment, and execution—within specified geographical boundaries to control human behavior. The term is also used to refer to the body authorized to exercise that power. Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 ended the Thirty Years’ War in Europe, international relations and diplomacy have been based on the principle of national sovereignty, defined as “a political entity’s externally recognized right to exercise final authority over its affairs.” Simply put, national sovereignty means that each national government has

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government
The legitimate use of force to control human behavior; also, the organization or agency authorized to exercise that force.

national sovereignty
A political entity’s externally recognized right to exercise final authority over its affairs.
the right to govern its people as it wishes, without interference from other nations.

Although the League of Nations and later the United Nations were supposed to introduce supranational order into the world, even these international organizations explicitly respected national sovereignty as the guiding principle of international relations. The U.N. Charter, Article 2.1, states, “The Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members.”

National sovereignty, however, is threatened under globalization. Consider the international community’s concern with starving refugees in the Darfur region of Sudan. The U.N. Security Council resolved to send troops to end the ethnic conflict that cost some 400,000 lives. The Sudanese government, suspected of causing the conflict, opposed the U.N. action as violating its sovereignty. Nevertheless, the humanitarian crisis in Sudan became closely monitored by the U.N., which took action against a member state.

Global forces also generate pressures for international law. Consider the 1982 Law of the Sea Treaty, which governs maritime law from mineral rights to shipping lanes under an International Seabed Authority. Although President Reagan did not sign it, the treaty came into force in 1994 when it was ratified by sixty nations. President Clinton then signed the treaty, but conservative senators kept it from being ratified, fearing loss of U.S. sovereignty. After global warming began to melt the Arctic ice, the U.S. Navy backed the treaty for guaranteeing free passage through international straits, and oil and mining companies favored its 350-mile grant of mineral rights around Alaska. It was reported out of committee for Senate consideration in 2007 with President Bush’s support. The treaty still remained unratified during Obama’s first year.

Our government, you might be surprised to learn, is worried about this trend of holding nations accountable to international law. In fact, in 2002, the United States “annulled” its signature to the 1998 treaty to create an International Criminal Court that would define and try crimes against humanity. Why would the United States oppose such an international court? One reason is its concern that U.S. soldiers stationed abroad might be arrested and tried in that court. Another reason is the death penalty, practiced in most of the United States but abolished by more than half the countries in the world and all countries in the European Union. Indeed, in 1996, the International Commission of Jurists condemned our death penalty as “arbitrarily and racially discriminatory,” and there is a
concerted campaign across Europe to force the sovereign United States of America to terminate capital punishment.  

As the world’s sole superpower, should the United States be above international law if its sovereignty is threatened by nations that don’t share our values? What action should we follow if this situation occurs?

Although this text is about American national government, it recognizes the growing impact of international politics and world opinion on U.S. politics. We are closely tied through trade to former enemies (we now import more goods from China—still communist—than from France and Britain combined), and we are thoroughly embedded in a worldwide economic, social, and political network. More than ever before, we must discuss American politics while

Sealand: Rebuilding a (Micro-)Nation

The Principality of Sealand is perched on a World War II military platform approximately six miles off the southeast coast of England. Located in international waters, the platform was acquired in 1967 by Paddy Roy Bates, a retired British officer who declared it a sovereign nation and lived there with his family for decades. In 2006, Sealand experienced a devastating fire that crippled its infrastructure. The tiny island country underwent extensive renovation, after which Prince Roy announced that the micro-nation was seeking “inward investment” in the form of purchase or long-term lease.

(Kim Gilmour/Alamy)
casting an eye to other countries to see how foreign affairs affect our government and how American politics affects government in other nations.

The Purposes of Government

All governments require their citizens to surrender some freedom as part of being governed. Why do people surrender their freedom to this control? To obtain the benefits of government. Throughout history, government seems to have served two major purposes: maintaining order (preserving life and protecting property) and providing public goods. More recently, some governments have pursued a third and more controversial purpose: promoting equality.

Maintaining Order

Maintaining order is the oldest objective of government. Order in this context is rich with meaning. Let’s start with “law and order.” Maintaining order in this sense means establishing the rule of law to preserve life and to protect property. To the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), preserving life was the most important function of government. In his classic philosophical treatise, *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes described life without government as life in a “state of nature.” Without rules, people would live as predators do, stealing and killing for their personal benefit. In Hobbes’s classic phrase, life in a state of nature would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” He believed that a single ruler, or sovereign, must possess unquestioned authority to guarantee the safety of the weak to protect them from the attacks of the strong. He believed that complete obedience to the sovereign’s strict laws was a small price to pay for the security of living in a civil society.

Most of us can only imagine what a state of nature would be like. But in some parts of the world, people live in a state of lawlessness. That has been the situation in Somalia since 1991, when the government was toppled and warlords feuded over territory. Today, the government controls only a portion of the capital, Mogadishu, and Somali pirates seize ships off its shore with impunity.22 Throughout history, authoritarian rulers have used people’s fears of civil disorder to justify taking power and becoming the new established order.

Hobbes’s conception of life in the cruel state of nature led him to view government primarily as a means of guaranteeing people’s
survival. Other theorists, taking survival for granted, believed that government protected order by preserving private property (goods and land owned by individuals). Foremost among them was John Locke (1632–1704), another English philosopher. In *Two Treatises on Government* (1690), he wrote that the protection of life, liberty, and property was the basic objective of government. His thinking strongly influenced the Declaration of Independence, which identifies “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” as “unalienable Rights” of citizens under government.

Not everyone believes that the protection of private property is a valid objective of government. The German philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883) rejected the private ownership of property used in the production of goods or services. Marx's ideas form the basis of communism, a complex theory that gives ownership of all land and productive facilities to the people—in effect, to the government. In line with communist theory, the 1977 constitution of the former Soviet Union declared that the nation’s land, minerals, waters, and forests “are the exclusive property of the state.” In addition, “The state owns the basic means of production in industry, construction, and agriculture; means of transport and communication; the banks, the property of state-run trade organizations and public utilities, and other state-run undertakings.” Even today's market-oriented China still clings to the principle that all land belongs to the state, and not until 2007 did it pass a law that protected private homes and businesses.

### Providing Public Goods

After governments have established basic order, they can pursue other ends. Using their coercive powers, they can tax citizens to raise funds to spend on public goods, which are benefits and services that are available to everyone, such as education, sanitation, and parks. Public goods benefit all citizens but are not likely to be produced by the voluntary acts of individuals. The government of ancient Rome, for example, built aqueducts to carry fresh water from the mountains to the city. Road building is another public good provided by the government since ancient times.

Some government enterprises that have been common in other countries—running railroads, operating coal mines, generating electric power—are politically controversial or even unacceptable in the United States. Hence, many people objected when the Bush administration took over General Motors and Chrysler in 2008 to ensure...
facilitate an orderly bankruptcy. Many Americans believe public goods and services should be provided by private business operating for profit.

**Promoting Equality**

The promotion of equality has not always been a major objective of government. It gained prominence in the twentieth century, in the aftermath of industrialization and urbanization. Confronted by the contrast of poverty amid plenty, some political leaders in European nations pioneered extensive government programs to improve life for the poor. Under the emerging concept of the welfare state, government’s role expanded to provide individuals with medical care, education, and a guaranteed income “from cradle to grave.” Sweden, Britain, and other nations adopted welfare programs aimed at reducing social inequalities. This relatively new purpose of government has been by far the most controversial. People often oppose taxation for public goods (such as building roads and schools) because of its cost alone. They oppose more strongly taxation for government programs to promote economic and social equality on principle.

The key issue here is the government’s role in redistributing income, that is, taking from the wealthy to give to the poor. Charity (voluntary giving to the poor) has a strong basis in Western religious traditions; using the power of the state to support the poor does not. Using the state to redistribute income was originally a radical idea, set forth by Marx as the ultimate principle of developed communism: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”25 This extreme has never been realized in any government, not even in communist states. But over time, taking from the rich to help the needy has become a legitimate function of most governments.

That function is not without controversy, however. Especially since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the government’s role in redistributing income to promote economic equality has been a major source of policy debate in the United States. In 2006, for example, Democrats in the Senate blocked a bill passed in the House that would have raised the minimum wage from $5.15 to $7.25. They objected to the bill because it would have also cut the estate tax for the wealthy. The minimum wage increase was ultimately passed in 2007, but only by attaching it to a bill funding the war effort in Iraq.
Government can also promote social equality through policies that do not redistribute income. For example, in 2000 Vermont passed a law allowing persons of the same sex to enter a “civil union” granting access to similar benefits enjoyed by persons of different sexes through marriage. Over the next decade, Vermont replaced the term civil unions with marriage, and the legislatures or courts in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Iowa, and the District of Columbia put same-sex marriage laws into effect. In this instance, laws advancing social equality may clash with different social values held by other citizens. Indeed, thirty-one states blocked same-sex marriages through public referenda, and public ballot measures in Maine and California repealed same-sex marriage laws passed in those states.26

A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Government

Citizens have very different views on how vigorously they want government to maintain order, provide public goods, and promote equality. Of the three objectives, providing public goods usually is less controversial than maintaining order or promoting equality. After all, government spending for highways, schools, and parks carries benefits for nearly every citizen. Moreover, these services merely cost money. The cost of maintaining order and promoting equality is greater than money; it usually means a trade-off of basic values.

To understand government and the political process, you must be able to recognize these trade-offs and identify the basic values they entail. You need to take a much broader view than that offered by examining specific political events. You need to use political concepts. A concept is a generalized idea of a class of items or thoughts. It groups various events, objects, or qualities under a common classification or label.

The framework that supports this text consists of five concepts that figure prominently in political analysis. We regard these five concepts as especially important to a broad understanding of American politics, and we use them repeatedly. This framework will help you evaluate political events long after you have read this book.

The five concepts that we emphasize relate to (1) what government tries to do and (2) how it decides to do it. The concepts that relate to what government tries to do are order, freedom, and equality. All governments by definition value order; maintaining
order is part of the meaning of government. Most governments at least claim to preserve individual freedom while they maintain order, although they vary widely in the extent to which they succeed. Few governments even profess to guarantee equality, and governments differ greatly in policies that pit equality against freedom. Our conceptual framework should help you evaluate the extent to which the United States pursues all three values through its government.

How government chooses the proper mix of order, freedom, and equality in its policymaking has to do with the process of choice. We evaluate the American governmental process using two models of democratic government: majoritarian and pluralist. Many governments profess to be democracies. Whether they are or not depends on their (and our) meaning of the term. Even countries that Americans agree are democracies, such as the United States and Britain, differ substantially in the type of democracy they practice. We can use our conceptual models of democratic government both to classify the type of democracy practiced in the United States and to evaluate the government’s success in fulfilling that model.

The five concepts can be organized into two groups:

1. Concepts that identify the values pursued by government:
   - Freedom
   - Order
   - Equality

2. Concepts that describe models of democratic government:
   - Majoritarian democracy
   - Pluralist democracy

First we examine freedom, order, and equality as conflicting values pursued by government. Later in this chapter, we discuss majoritarian democracy and pluralist democracy as alternative institutional models for implementing democratic government.

**The Concepts of Freedom, Order, and Equality**

These three terms—freedom, order, and equality—have a range of connotations in American politics. Both freedom and equality are positive terms that politicians have learned to use to their own advantage. Consequently, freedom and equality mean different things to different people at different times, depending on the political context in which they are used. Order, however, has negative
connotations for many people because it brings to mind government intrusion in private lives. Except during periods of social strife or external threat (e.g., after September 11, 2001), few politicians in Western democracies call openly for more order. Because all governments infringe on freedom, we examine that concept first.

**Freedom.** Freedom can be used in two major senses: freedom of and freedom from. Franklin Delano Roosevelt used the word in each sense in a speech he made shortly before the United States entered World War II. He described four freedoms: freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom from fear, and freedom from want. Freedom of is the absence of constraints on behavior. It is freedom to do something. In this sense, freedom is synonymous with liberty. Freedom from suggests immunity from something undesirable or negative, such as fear and want. In the modern political context, freedom from often connotes the fight against exploitation and oppression. The cry of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, “Freedom Now!” conveyed this meaning. If you recognize that freedom in the latter sense means immunity from discrimination, you can see that it comes close to the concept of equality. In this book, we avoid using freedom to mean “freedom from”; for this sense of the word, we simply use equality. When we use freedom, we mean “freedom of.”

**Order.** When order is viewed in the narrow sense of preserving life and protecting property, most citizens would concede the importance of maintaining order and thereby grant the need for government. But when order is viewed in the broader sense of preserving the social order, people are more likely to argue that maintaining order is not a legitimate function of government. Social order refers to established patterns of authority in society and to traditional modes of behavior. However, it is important to remember that social order can change. Today, perfectly respectable men and women wear bathing suits that would have caused a scandal a hundred years ago.

A government can protect the established order by using its police power—its authority to safeguard residents’ safety, health, welfare, and morals. The extent to which government should use this authority is a topic of ongoing debate in the United States and is constantly being redefined by the courts. After September 11, 2001, new laws were passed increasing government’s power to investigate suspicious activities by foreign nationals in order to...
deter terrorism. After the underwear bomber was thwarted from blowing up an airliner on Christmas Day 2009, the Transportation Security Administration began deploying 450 advanced full-body scanners to probe through clothing. Despite their desire to be safe from further attacks, some citizens feared the erosion of their civil liberties.

Most governments are inherently conservative; they tend to resist social change. But some governments aim to radically restructure the social order. Social change is most dramatic when a government is overthrown through force and replaced. This can occur through an internal revolution or a "regime change" effected externally. Societies can also work to change social patterns more gradually through the legal process. Our use of the term order in this book encompasses all three aspects: preserving life, protecting property, and maintaining traditional patterns of social relationships.

Equality. Like freedom and order, equality is used in different senses to support different causes. Political equality in elections is easy to define: each citizen has one and only one vote. This basic concept is central to democratic theory, a subject we explore at length later in this chapter. But when some people advocate political equality, they mean more than "one person, one vote." These people contend that an urban ghetto dweller and the chairman of the board of Microsoft are not politically equal despite the fact that each has one vote. Through occupation or wealth, some citizens are more able than others to influence political decisions. For example, wealthy citizens can exert influence by advertising in the mass media or contacting friends in high places. Lacking great wealth and political connections, most citizens do not have such influence. Thus, some analysts argue that equality in wealth, education, and status—that is, social equality—is necessary for true political equality.

There are two routes to promoting social equality: providing equal opportunities and ensuring equal outcomes. Equality of opportunity means that each person has the same chance to succeed in life. This idea is deeply ingrained in American culture. The U.S. Constitution prohibits titles of nobility, and owning property is not a requirement for holding public office. Public schools and libraries are free to all. For many people, the concept of social equality is satisfied by offering equal opportunities for advancement—it is not essential that people actually end up being equal. For others, true social equality means nothing less than equality of outcome. They believe that society must see to it that people are
equal. According to this view, it is not enough that governments provide people with equal opportunities; they must also design policies to redistribute wealth and status so that economic and social equality are achieved.

Some link equality of outcome with the concept of government-supported rights—the idea that every citizen is entitled to certain benefits of government, that government should guarantee its citizens adequate (if not equal) housing, employment, medical care, and income. If citizens are entitled to government benefits as a matter of right, government efforts to promote equality of outcome become legitimized.

Clearly, the concept of equality of outcome is very different from that of equality of opportunity, and it requires a much greater degree of government activity. It also clashes more directly with the concept of freedom. By taking from one person to give to another, which is necessary for the redistribution of income and status, the government creates winners and losers. The winners may believe that justice has been served by the redistribution. The losers often feel strongly that their freedom to enjoy their income and status has suffered.

Two Dilemmas of Government

The two major dilemmas facing American government in the early years of the twenty-first century stem from the oldest and the newest objectives of government: maintaining order and promoting equality. Both order and equality are important social values, but government cannot pursue either without sacrificing a third important value: individual freedom. The clash between freedom and order forms the original dilemma of government; the clash between freedom and equality forms the modern dilemma of government. Although the dilemmas are very different, each involves trading off some amount of freedom for another value.

The Original Dilemma: Freedom Versus Order. The conflict between freedom and order originates in the very meaning of government as the legitimate use of force to control human behavior. How much freedom a citizen must surrender to government is a dilemma that has occupied philosophers for hundreds of years. The original purpose of government was to protect life and property, to make citizens safe from violence. How well is the American government doing today in providing law and order to its citizens? More than
66 percent of the respondents in a 2009 national survey said that there were areas within a mile of their home where they were “afraid to walk alone at night.”

Contrast the fear of crime in urban America with the sense of personal safety while walking in Moscow, Warsaw, or Prague when the old communist governments still ruled in Eastern Europe. It was common to see old and young strolling late at night along the streets and in the parks of those cities. The communist regimes gave their police great powers to control guns, monitor citizens’ movements, and arrest and imprison suspicious people, which enabled them to do a better job of maintaining order. Communist governments deliberately chose order over freedom.

In the abstract, people value both freedom and order; in real life, the two values inherently conflict. By definition, any policy that strengthens one value takes away from the other. In a democracy, policy choices hinge on how much citizens value freedom and how much they value order.

The Modern Dilemma: Freedom Versus Equality. Popular opinion has it that freedom and equality go hand in hand. In reality, these two values usually clash when governments enact policies to promote social equality. Because social equality is a relatively recent government objective, deciding between policies that promote equality at the expense of freedom, and vice versa, is the modern dilemma of politics. Consider these examples:

- During the 1970s, the courts ordered the busing of schoolchildren to achieve equal proportions of blacks and whites in public schools. This action was motivated by concern for educational equality, but it also impaired freedom of choice.
- During the 1980s, some states passed legislation that went beyond giving men and women equal pay for equal work to the more radical notion of pay equity—equal pay for comparable work. Women were to be paid at a rate equal to men’s even if they had different jobs, providing the women’s jobs were of “comparable worth” (meaning the skills and responsibilities were comparable).
- During the 1990s, Congress prohibited discrimination in employment, public services, and public accommodations on the basis of physical or mental disabilities. Under the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, businesses with twenty-five or more employees could not pass over an otherwise qualified disabled person in employment or promotion, and new buses and trains had to be made accessible to them.
Compared with What?

The Importance of Order and Freedom in Other Nations

Compared with citizens in twenty-nine other nations, Americans do not value order very much. The World Values Survey asked respondents to select which of four national goals was “very important”:

- Maintaining order in the nation
- Giving people more say in important government decisions
- Fighting rising prices
- Protecting freedom of speech

The United States ranked twenty-eighth in the list of those selecting “maintaining order” as very important. Although American citizens do not value government control of social behavior as much as others, Americans do value freedom of speech more highly. Citizens in only three countries favor protecting freedom of speech more than citizens in the United States.

During the first decade of the 2000s, Congress passed the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA). Signed by President Bush in 2008, it prohibited companies from discriminating in hiring based on an individual’s genetic tests, genetic tests of a family member, and family medical history.

The clash between freedom and order is obvious, but the clash between freedom and equality is more subtle. Americans, who think of freedom and equality as complementary rather than conflicting values, often do not notice the clash between those two values. When forced to choose between them, however, Americans are far more likely than people in other countries to choose freedom over equality.

The conflicts among freedom, order, and equality explain a great deal of the political conflict in the United States. The conflicts also underlie the ideologies that people use to structure their understanding of politics.

Idea and the Scope of Government

Some people hold an assortment of values and beliefs that produce contradictory opinions on government policies. Others organize their opinions into a political ideology: a consistent set of values and beliefs about the proper purpose and scope of government.

How far should government go to maintain order, provide public goods, and promote equality? We can analyze answers to this question by referring to philosophies about the proper scope of government—the range of permissible activities. Imagine a continuum. At one end is the belief that government should do everything; at the other is the belief that government should not exist. These extreme ideologies—from “least government” to “most government”—and those that fall in between are shown in Figure 1.1.

Totalitarianism. **Totalitarianism** is the belief that government should have unlimited power. A totalitarian government controls all sectors of society: business, labor, education, religion, sports, the arts, and others. A true totalitarian favors a network of laws, rules, and regulations that guides every aspect of individual behavior.

Socialism. Whereas totalitarianism refers to government in general, socialism pertains to government’s role in the economy. Like communism, **socialism** is an economic system based on Marxist theory.
Under socialism (and communism), the scope of government extends to ownership or control of the basic industries that produce goods and services (communications, heavy industry, transportation). Although socialism favors a strong role for government in regulating private industry and directing the economy, it allows more room than communism does for private ownership of productive capacity.

Communism in theory was supposed to result in a withering away of the state, but communist governments in practice tended toward totalitarianism, controlling economic, political, and social life through a dominant party organization. Some socialist governments, however, practice democratic socialism. They guarantee civil liberties (such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion) and allow their citizens to determine the extent of the government’s activity through free elections and competitive political parties. The governments of Britain, Sweden, Germany, and France, among other democracies, have at times been avowedly socialist.

democratic socialism
A socialist form of government that guarantees civil liberties such as freedom of speech and religion. Citizens determine the extent of government activity through free elections and competitive political parties.
Capitalism. Capitalism also relates to the government’s role in the economy. In contrast to both socialism and communism, capitalism supports free enterprise—private businesses operating without government regulations. Some theorists, most notably the late economist Milton Friedman, argue that free enterprise is necessary for free politics. Whether this argument is valid depends in part on our understanding of democracy, a subject we discuss later in this chapter.

The United States is decidedly a capitalist country, more so than most other Western nations. But our government does extend its authority into the economic sphere, regulating private businesses and directing the overall economy. Both American liberals and conservatives embrace capitalism, but they differ on the nature and amount of government intervention in the economy that is necessary or desirable.

Libertarianism. Libertarianism opposes all government action except that which is necessary to protect life and property. For example, libertarians believe that social programs that provide food, clothing, and shelter are outside the proper scope of government. They also oppose any government intervention in the economy. This kind of economic policy is called laissez faire, a French phrase that means “let (people) do (as they please).” Such an extreme policy extends beyond the free enterprise advocated by most capitalists.

Anarchism. Anarchism stands opposite totalitarianism on the political continuum. Anarchists oppose all government in any form. As a political philosophy, anarchism values absolute freedom above all else. Like totalitarianism, it is not a popular philosophy, but it does have adherents on the political fringes. Discussing old and new forms of anarchy, Joseph Kahn said, “Nothing has revived anarchism like globalization.”

Liberals and Conservatives. As shown in Figure 1.1, practical politics in the United States ranges over only the central portion of the continuum. The extreme positions, totalitarianism and anarchism, are rarely argued in public debate. And in this era of distrust of “big government,” few American politicians would openly advocate socialism. Most debate is limited to a narrow range of political thought. On one side are people commonly called liberals; on the other are conservatives. In popular usage, liberals favor more government,
conservatives less. This distinction is clear when the issue is government spending to provide public goods. Liberals are willing to use government to promote equality but not order. Thus, they generally favor generous government support for education, wildlife protection, public transportation, and a whole range of social programs. Conservatives want smaller government budgets and fewer government programs. They support free enterprise and argue against government job programs, regulation of business, and legislation of working conditions and wage rates. In short, they prefer to use government to promote order rather than equality.

In other areas, liberal and conservative ideologies are less consistent. The differences no longer hinge on the narrow question of the government’s role in providing public goods. Liberals still favor more government and conservatives less, but this is no longer the critical difference between them. Today, that difference stems from their attitudes toward the purpose of government. Conservatives support the original purpose of government: to maintain

Anarchists in Action

Anarchism as a philosophy views government as an unnecessary evil used by the wealthy to exploit the poor. In June 2010, a small group of young anarchists broke away from an otherwise peaceful protest against the G20 summit meeting in Toronto, Canada. While the main body of protestors marched to raise awareness of the negative impacts of globalization on the poor, the young anarchists vandalized businesses and ultimately burned police cars.

(AP Photo/The Canadian Press, Chris Young)

lubers
Those who are willing to use government to promote equality but not order.

conservatives
Those who are willing to use government to promote order but not equality.
social order. They are willing to use the coercive power of the state to force citizens to be orderly. But they would not stop with defining, preventing, and punishing crime. They tend to want to preserve traditional patterns of social relations—the domestic role of women and the importance of religion in school and family life, for example.

Liberals are less likely than conservatives to want to use government power to maintain order. Liberals do not shy away from using government coercion, but they use it for a different purpose: to promote equality. They support laws that ensure equal treatment of homosexuals in employment, housing, and education; laws that force private businesses to hire and promote women and members of minority groups; and laws that require public transportation to provide equal access to people with disabilities. Conservatives do not oppose equality, but they do not value it to the extent of using the government’s power to enforce it. For liberals, the use of that power to promote equality is both valid and necessary.

A Two-Dimensional Classification of Ideologies
To classify liberal and conservative ideologies more accurately, we have to incorporate the values of freedom, order, and equality into the classification. We can do this using the model in Figure 1.2. It depicts the conflicting values along two separate dimensions, each anchored in maximum freedom at the lower left. One dimension extends horizontally from maximum freedom on the left to maximum order on the right. The other extends vertically from maximum freedom at the bottom to maximum equality at the top. Each box represents a different ideological type: libertarians, liberals, conservatives, and communitarians.

Libertarians value freedom more than they value order or equality (we will use libertarian for people who have libertarian tendencies but may not accept the whole philosophy). In practical terms, libertarians want minimal government intervention in both the economic and the social spheres. For example, they oppose affirmative action laws and laws that restrict transmission of sexually explicit material. Liberals value freedom more than order but not more than equality. They oppose laws that ban sexually explicit publications but support affirmative action. Conservatives value freedom more than equality but would restrict freedom to preserve social order. Conservatives oppose affirmative action but favor laws that restrict pornography.

**libertarians**
Those who are opposed to using government to promote either order or equality.
Finally, at the upper right in Figure 1.2, we have a group that values both equality and order more than freedom. Its members support both affirmative action laws and laws that restrict pornography. We will call this new group communitarians.36 The term is used narrowly in contemporary politics to reflect the philosophy of the Communitarian Network, a political movement founded by sociologist Amitai Etzioni.37 This movement rejects both the liberal–conservative classification and the libertarian argument that “individuals should be left on their own to pursue their choices, rights, and self-interests.”38 Like liberals, Etzioni’s communitarians believe that there is a role for government in helping the disadvantaged. Like conservatives, they believe that government should be used to promote moral values—preserving the family through more stringent divorce laws and limiting the dissemination of pornography, for example.39 However, the Communitarian Network is not dedicated to big government. According to

**FIGURE 1.2** Ideologies: A Two-Dimensional Framework

The four ideological types are defined by the values they favor in resolving the two major dilemmas of government: how much freedom should be sacrificed in pursuit of order and equality, respectively. Test yourself by thinking about the values that are most important to you. Which box in the figure best represents your combination of values?

**THE MODERN DILEMMA**

- **Liberals**
  - Favor: Government activities that promote equality, such as affirmative action programs to employ minorities and increased spending on public housing.
  - Oppose: Government actions that restrict individual liberties, such as banning sexually explicit movies or mandatory testing for AIDS.

- **Communitarians**
  - Favor: Government activities that promote equality, such as affirmative action programs to employ minorities and increased spending on public housing.
  - Favor: Government actions that impose social order, such as banning sexually explicit movies or mandatory testing for AIDS.

- **Libertarians**
  - Oppose: Government activities that interfere with the market, such as affirmative action programs to employ minorities and increased spending on public housing.
  - Oppose: Government actions that restrict individual liberties, such as banning sexually explicit movies or mandatory testing for AIDS.

- **Conservatives**
  - Oppose: Government activities that interfere with the market, such as affirmative action programs to employ minorities and increased spending on public housing.
  - Favor: Government actions that impose social order, such as banning sexually explicit movies or mandatory testing for AIDS.

**THE ORIGINAL DILEMMA**

- **Liberals**
  - Favor: Government activities that promote equality, such as affirmative action programs to employ minorities and increased spending on public housing.
  - Oppose: Government actions that restrict individual liberties, such as banning sexually explicit movies or mandatory testing for AIDS.

- **Communitarians**
  - Favor: Government activities that promote equality, such as affirmative action programs to employ minorities and increased spending on public housing.
  - Favor: Government actions that impose social order, such as banning sexually explicit movies or mandatory testing for AIDS.

- **Libertarians**
  - Oppose: Government activities that interfere with the market, such as affirmative action programs to employ minorities and increased spending on public housing.
  - Oppose: Government actions that restrict individual liberties, such as banning sexually explicit movies or mandatory testing for AIDS.

- **Conservatives**
  - Oppose: Government activities that interfere with the market, such as affirmative action programs to employ minorities and increased spending on public housing.
  - Favor: Government actions that impose social order, such as banning sexually explicit movies or mandatory testing for AIDS.

**communitarians**

Those who are willing to use government to promote both order and equality.
its platform, “The government should step in only to the extent that other social subsystems fail, rather than seek to replace them.”

Our definition of communitarian (small “c”) clearly embraces the Communitarian Network’s philosophy, but it is broader: communitarians favor government programs that promote both order and equality, somewhat in keeping with socialist theory.

By analyzing political ideologies on two dimensions rather than one, we can explain why people can seem to be liberal on one issue (favoring a broader scope of government action) and conservative on another (favoring less government action). The reason hinges on the purpose of a given government action: Which value does it promote: order or equality? According to our typology, only libertarians and communitarians are consistent in their attitudes toward the scope of government activity, whatever its purpose. Libertarians value freedom so highly that they oppose most government efforts to enforce either order or equality. Communitarians (in our use) are inclined to trade off freedom for both order and equality. Liberals and conservatives, in contrast, favor or oppose government activity depending on its purpose. As you will learn in Chapter 4, large groups of Americans fall into each of the four ideological categories. Because Americans increasingly choose four different resolutions to the original and modern dilemmas of government, the simple labels liberal and conservative no longer describe contemporary political ideologies as well as they did in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

The American Governmental Process: Majoritarian or Pluralist?

After his inauguration as president, Barack Obama’s discussions about the economy with congressional Democrats and Republicans revealed that the parties were united on only one thing: something should be done to stimulate the economy and to prevent it from declining further. The collapse of the real estate bubble and the broad economic downturn in 2008 led not only to Obama’s decisive victory over Republican John McCain a few months earlier but also to strong gains for Democrats in Congress, putting them in firm control of both the House and Senate.

The Republican leaders stood fast for their party’s philosophy of small government and low taxes, recommending that the stimulus package emphasize tax cuts and tax incentives. The Democrats
supported direct government spending on public works like roads and bridges, thus putting some of the unemployed immediately to work. Along with infrastructure support, the plan included large payments to the states to help them avoid laying off employees since state tax revenues plummeted in the wake of the recession. A small tax cut for low- and middle-income workers was also part of the Democratic package.

While there was no conclusive answer among economists about which philosophy was better, that underlying question was academic: as Obama pointed out, he and the congressional Democrats won the election. Their philosophy would carry the day, and Democratic majorities in the House and Senate backed the plan.

On the surface it seemed like democracy had worked its will as the majority had spoken. Yet beneath the surface of the Democratic plan, another dynamic was at work. The overall package appropriated $787 billion to be spent to try to reverse the downward spiral of the recession. But as the specifics of the spending plan were being formulated by Congress, there was a vast array of choices as to exactly what the money would be spent on. Interest groups lobbied Congress furiously for their own priorities. Business was especially active as different industries pushed legislators to support spending or create tax breaks that would help that particular industry. Some got what they wanted; others were disappointed. Representatives and senators listened to the many voices of the different parts of the American economy and then made their choices. The 2008 election faded into the background as legislators negotiated among themselves with an eye on which types of businesses and nonprofits in their districts or states would gain under alternative proposals.

These are very different models of government. Should Congress follow the president, who won a majority of the vote, in interpreting his stimulus package as what the people want? Or is majority opinion a blunt and imprecise instrument, and should closer consideration be given to the rich and diverse constituencies that form our body politic?

To this point, our discussion of political ideologies has centered on conflicting views about the values government should pursue. We now examine how government should decide what to do. In particular, we set forth two criteria for judging whether a government’s decision-making process is democratic, one emphasizing majority rule and the other emphasizing the role of interest groups.
The Theory of Democratic Government

Americans have a simple answer to the question, “Who should govern?” It is, “The people.” Unfortunately, this answer is too simple. It fails to say who the people are. Should we include young children? Recent immigrants? Illegal aliens? This answer also fails to indicate how “the people” should do the governing. Should they be assembled in a stadium? Vote by mail? Choose representatives to govern for them? We need to take a close look at what “government by the people” really means.

The word democracy originated in Greek writings around the fifth century B.C. Demos referred to the common people, the masses; kratos meant “power.” The ancient Greeks were afraid of democracy, which they viewed as rule by rank-and-file citizens. That fear is evident in the term demagogue. We use that term today to refer to a politician who appeals to and often deceives the masses by manipulating their emotions and prejudices.

Many centuries after the Greeks defined democracy, the idea still carried the connotation of mob rule. When George Washington was president, opponents of a new political party disparagingly called it a democratic party. No one would do that in politics today. In fact, the names of more than 20 percent of the world’s political parties contain some variation of the word democracy.43

There are two major schools of thought about what constitutes democracy. The first believes democracy is a form of government, and it emphasizes the procedures that enable the people to govern: meeting to discuss issues, voting in elections, and running for public office, for example. The second sees democracy in the substance of government policies, in freedom of religion and providing for human needs. The procedural approach focuses on how decisions are made; the substantive approach is concerned with what government does.

The Procedural View of Democracy. Procedural democratic theory sets forth principles that describe how government should make decisions. These principles address three distinct questions:

1. Who should participate in decision making?
2. How much should each participant’s vote count?
3. How many votes are needed to reach a decision?

According to procedural democratic theory, all adults within the boundaries of the political community should participate in government decision making. We refer to this principle as universal participation. How much should each participant’s vote count?
According to procedural theory, all votes should count equally. This is the principle of political equality. Note that universal participation and political equality are two distinct principles. It is not enough for everyone to participate in a decision; all votes must carry equal weight.

Finally, procedural theory prescribes that a group should decide to do what the majority of its participants wants to do. This principle is called majority rule. (If participants divide over more than two alternatives and none receives a majority, the principle usually defaults to plurality rule, in which the group should do what the largest group of participants wants, even if fewer than half of those involved hold that view.)

A Complication: Direct Versus Indirect Democracy. Universal participation, political equality, and majority rule are widely recognized as necessary for democratic decision making. Small, simple societies can achieve all three with direct or participatory democracy, in which all members of the group meet to make decisions, observing political equality and majority rule. However, in the United States and nearly all other democracies, participatory democracy is rare. Clearly, all Americans cannot gather at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., to decide defense policy.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution had their own conception of democracy. They instituted representative democracy, a system in which citizens participate in government by electing public officials to make government decisions on their behalf. Within the context of representative democracy, we adhere to the principles of universal participation, political equality, and majority rule to guarantee that elections are democratic. But what happens after the election?

Suppose the elected representatives do not make the decisions the people would have made if they had gathered for the same purpose. To account for this possibility in representative government, procedural theory provides a fourth decision-making principle: responsiveness. Elected representatives should follow the general contours of public opinion as they formulate complex pieces of legislation.

By adding responsiveness to deal with the case of indirect democracy, we now have four principles of procedural democracy:

- Universal participation
- Political equality
Majority rule
Government responsiveness to public opinion

The Substantive View of Democracy. According to procedural theory, the principle of responsiveness is absolute: the government should do what the majority wants, regardless of what that is. At first this seems a reasonable way to protect the rights of citizens in a representative democracy. But what about the rights of minorities? To limit the government’s responsiveness to public opinion, we must look outside procedural democratic theory to substantive democratic theory. Substantive democratic theory focuses on the substance of government policies, not on the procedures followed in making those policies. It argues that in a democratic government, certain principles must be embodied in government policies. Substantive theorists would reject a law that requires Bible reading in schools because it would violate a substantive principle, the freedom of religion. The core of the substantive principles of American democracy is embedded in the Bill of Rights and other amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

In defining the principles that underlie democratic government—and the policies of that government—most substantive theorists agree on a basic criterion: government policies should guarantee civil liberties (freedom of behavior such as freedom of religion and freedom of expression) and civil rights (powers or privileges that government may not arbitrarily deny to individuals, such as protection against discrimination in employment and housing). But agreement among substantive theorists breaks down when discussion moves from civil rights to social rights (adequate health care, quality education, decent housing) and economic rights (private property, steady employment). For example, some insist that policies that promote social equality are essential to democratic government. Others restrict the requirements of substantive democracy to policies that safeguard civil liberties and civil rights.45

A theorist’s political ideology tends to explain his or her position on what democracy really requires in substantive policies. Conservative theorists have a narrow view of the scope of democratic government and a narrow view of the social and economic rights guaranteed by that government. Liberal theorists believe that a democratic government should guarantee its citizens a much broader spectrum of social and economic rights.

Procedural Democracy Versus Substantive Democracy. The problem with the substantive view of democracy is that it does not provide
clear, precise criteria that allow us to determine whether a government is democratic. Substantive theorists are free to promote their pet values—separation of church and state, guaranteed employment, equal rights for women, or whatever else—under the guise of substantive democracy.

The procedural viewpoint also has a problem. Although it presents specific criteria for democratic government, those criteria can produce undesirable social policies that prey on minorities. This clashes with minority rights—the idea that all citizens are entitled to certain rights that cannot be denied by the majority. One way to protect minority rights is to limit the principle of majority rule by requiring a two-thirds majority or some other extraordinary majority when decisions must be made on certain subjects. Another way is to put the issue in the Constitution, beyond the reach of majority rule.

Clearly, procedural democracy and substantive democracy are not always compatible. In choosing one over the other, we are also choosing to focus on either procedures or policies. As authors of this text, we favor a compromise between the two. On the whole, we favor the procedural conception of democracy because it more closely approaches the classical definition of democracy: “government by the people.” And procedural democracy is founded on clear, well-established rules for decision making. But the theory has a serious drawback: it allows a democratic government to enact policies that can violate the substantive principles of democracy. Thus, pure procedural democracy should be diluted so that minority rights and civil liberties are guaranteed as part of the structure of government.

**Institutional Models of Democracy**

Some democratic theorists favor institutions that tie government decisions closely to the desires of the majority of citizens. If most citizens want laws against the sale of pornography, then the government should outlaw pornography. If citizens want more money spent on defense and less on social welfare (or vice versa), the government should act accordingly. For these theorists, the essence of democratic government is majority rule and responsiveness. Other theorists place less importance on these principles. They do not believe in relying heavily on mass opinion; instead, they favor institutions that allow groups of citizens to defend their interests in the public policymaking process.
Both schools hold a procedural view of democracy but differ in how they interpret “government by the people.” We can summarize these theoretical positions using two alternative models of democracy. As a model, each is a hypothetical plan, a blueprint, for achieving democratic government through institutional mechanisms. The majoritarian model values participation by the people in general; the pluralist model values participation by the people in groups.

**The Majoritarian Model of Democracy.** The majoritarian model of democracy relies on our intuitive notion of what is fair. It interprets “government by the people” as government by the majority of the people. To force the government to respond to public opinion, the majoritarian model depends on several mechanisms that allow the people to participate directly.

The popular election of government officials is the primary mechanism for democratic government in the majoritarian model. Citizens are expected to control their representatives’ behavior by choosing wisely in the first place and by reelecting or voting out public officials according to their performance.

Majoritarian theorists also see elections as a means for deciding government policies. An election on a policy issue is called a referendum. When a policy question is put on the ballot by the action of citizens circulating petitions and gathering a required minimum number of signatures, it is called an initiative. Twenty-one states allow their legislatures to put referenda before the voters and give their citizens the right to place initiatives on the ballot. Five other states make provision for one mechanism or the other. Eighteen states also allow for the recall of state officials, a means of forcing a special election for an up or down vote on a sitting governor or state judge.

In the United States, no provisions exist for referenda at the federal level. Some other countries do allow policy questions to be put before the public. In a national referendum in 2009, a clear majority of voters in Switzerland voted to ban construction of minarets on any of the country’s mosques. (Minarets are the thin spires atop a mosque.) This vote was clearly hostile to the country’s small (5 percent) Muslim population. One of the dangers of referenda is the power of a majority to treat a minority in a harsh or intimidating way.

The majoritarian model contends that citizens can control their government if they have adequate mechanisms for popular
participation. It also assumes that citizens are knowledgeable about government and politics, want to participate in the political process, and make rational decisions in voting for their elected representatives.

Critics contend that Americans are not knowledgeable enough for majoritarian democracy to work. They point to research that shows that only 36 percent of a national sample of voters said that they follow news about politics “very closely.” Two scholars who have studied citizens’ interest in politics conclude that most Americans favor “stealth” democracy, “in which ordinary people do not have to get involved.” If most citizens feel that way, then majoritarian democracy is not viable, even with the wonders of modern information technology. Defenders of majoritarian democracy respond that although individual Americans may have only limited knowledge of or interest in government, the American public as a whole still has coherent and stable opinions on the major policy questions.
An Alternative Model: Pluralist Democracy. For years, political scientists struggled valiantly to reconcile the majoritarian model of democracy with polls that showed a widespread ignorance of politics among the American people. When only a little more than half of the adult population bothers to vote in presidential elections, our form of democracy seems to be government by some of the people.

The 1950s saw the evolution of an alternative interpretation of democracy, one tailored to the limited knowledge and participation of the real electorate, not the ideal one. It was based on the concept of pluralism: that modern society consists of innumerable groups that share economic, religious, ethnic, or cultural interests. Often people with similar interests organize formal groups. When an organized group seeks to influence government policy, it is called an interest group. Many interest groups regularly spend a great deal of time and money trying to influence government policy (see Chapter 7). Among them are the American Hospital Association, the National Association of Manufacturers, the National Education Association, the Associated Milk Producers, and the National Organization for Women.

The pluralist model of democracy interprets “government by the people” to mean government by people operating through competing interest groups. According to this model, democracy exists when many (plural) organizations operate separately from the government, press their interests on the government, and even challenge the government. Compared with majoritarian thinking, pluralist theory shifts the focus of democratic government from the mass electorate to organized groups. It changes the criterion for democratic government from responsiveness to mass public opinion to responsiveness to organized groups of citizens.

A decentralized, complex government structure offers the access and openness necessary for pluralist democracy. For pluralists, the ideal system is one that divides government authority among numerous institutions with overlapping authority. Under such a system, competing interest groups have alternative points of access to present and argue their claims. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People could not get Congress to outlaw segregated schools in the South, it turned to the federal court system, which did what Congress would not do. According to the ideal of pluralist democracy, if all opposing interests are allowed to organize and if the system can be kept open so that all substantial claims have an opportunity to be heard, the decision will serve the diverse needs of a pluralist society. Countries going through the
process of democratization can find the emergence of pluralism a challenge as new groups mean new demands upon government.

On one level, pluralism is alive and well. Interest groups in Washington are thriving, and the rise of many citizen groups has broadened representation beyond traditional business, labor, and professional groups. But on another level, political scientist Robert Putnam has documented declining participation in a wide variety of organizations. Americans are less inclined to be active members of civic groups like parent–teacher associations, the League of Woman Voters, and the Lions Club. Civic participation is a fundamental part of American democracy because it generates the social glue that helps to generate trust and cooperation in the political system.

The Majoritarian Model Versus the Pluralist Model. In majoritarian democracy, the mass public, not interest groups, controls government actions. The citizenry must be knowledgeable about government and willing to participate in the electoral process. Majoritarian democracy relies on electoral mechanisms that harness the power of the majority to make decisions. Conclusive elections and a centralized structure of government are mechanisms that aid majority rule. Cohesive political parties with well-defined programs also contribute to majoritarian democracy, because they offer voters a clear way to distinguish alternative sets of policies.

Pluralism does not demand much knowledge from citizens in general. It requires specialized knowledge only from groups of citizens, in particular their leaders. In contrast to majoritarian democracy, pluralist democracy seeks to limit majority action so that interest groups can be heard. It relies on strong interest groups and a decentralized government structure—mechanisms that interfere with majority rule, thereby protecting minority interests. We could even say that pluralism allows minorities to rule.

An Undemocratic Model: Elite Theory. If pluralist democracy allows minorities to rule, how does it differ from elite theory—the view that a small group of people (a minority) makes most important government decisions? According to elite theory, important government decisions are made by an identifiable and stable minority that shares certain characteristics, usually vast wealth and business connections. Elite theory appeals to many people, especially those who believe that wealth dominates politics.

According to elite theory, the United States is not a democracy but an oligarchy. Although the voters appear to control the government...
through elections, elite theorists argue that the powerful few in society manage to define the issues and constrain the outcomes of government decisions to suit their own interests. Clearly, elite theory describes a government that operates in an undemocratic fashion.

Political scientists have conducted numerous studies designed to test the validity of elite theory. Not all of those studies have come to the same conclusion, but the preponderance of evidence documenting government decisions on many different issues does not generally support elite theory—at least in the sense that an identifiable ruling elite usually gets its way. Not surprisingly, elite theorists reject this view. They argue that studies of decisions made on individual issues do not adequately test the influence of the power elite. Rather, they contend that much of the elite’s power comes from its ability to keep things off the political agenda—that is, its power derives from its ability to keep people from questioning fundamental assumptions about American capitalism.55

Elite theory remains part of the debate about the nature of American government and is forcefully argued by some severe critics of the American political system. Although we do not believe that the scholarly evidence supports elite theory, we do recognize that contemporary American pluralism favors some segments of society over others. The poor are chronically unorganized and are not well represented by interest groups. In contrast, business is better represented than any other sector of the public. Thus, one can endorse pluralist democracy as a more accurate description than elitism in American politics without believing that all groups are equally well represented.

Elite Theory Versus Pluralist Theory. The key difference between elite theory and pluralist theory lies in the durability of the ruling minority. In contrast to elite theory, pluralist theory does not define government conflict in terms of a minority versus the majority; instead, it sees many minorities vying with one another in each policy area. Pluralist democracy makes a virtue of the struggle between competing interests. It argues for government that accommodates this struggle and channels the result into government action. According to pluralist democracy, the public is best served if the government structure provides access for different groups to press their claims in competition with one another.

Note that pluralist democracy does not insist that all groups have equal influence on government decisions. In the political struggle, wealthy, well-organized groups have an inherent advantage over
poorer, inadequately organized groups. In fact, unorganized segments of the population may not even get their concerns placed on the agenda for government consideration. Indeed, studies of the congressional agenda demonstrate that it is characterized by little in the way of legislation concerned with poor or low-income Americans, while business-related bills are plentiful. This is a critical weakness of pluralism. However, pluralists contend that so long as all groups are able to participate vigorously in the decision-making process, the process is democratic.

Democracy and Globalization

While no government perfectly achieves the goals of the majoritarian or pluralist models of democracy, some nations approach these ideals closely enough to be considered practicing democracies. Governments can meet some criteria for a procedural democracy (universal participation, political equality, majority rule, and government responsiveness to public opinion) and fail to meet others. They can also differ in the extent to which they support freedom of speech and freedom of association, which create the necessary conditions for the practice of democracy. Various scholars and organizations have developed complicated databases that rate countries on a long list of indicators, providing a means of comparing countries along all criteria. One research institution has found a global trend toward freedom every decade since 1975, though in the past few years there has been a slight drop in the number of democracies. Democratization is a difficult process, and many countries fail completely or succeed only in the short run and lapse into a form of authoritarianism.

One reason that democratization can be so difficult is that ethnic and religious conflict is epidemic. Such conflict complicates efforts to democratize because antagonisms can run so deep that opposing groups do not want to grant political legitimacy to each other. As a result, ethnic and religious rivals are often more interested in achieving a form of government that oppresses their opponents (or, in their minds, maintains order) than in establishing a real democracy. These internal challenges can raise significant challenges for the global community. After toppling the Taliban government in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq, the U.S. government faced the much more daunting task of creating enduring democratic institutions in two countries rife with ethnic, tribal, and religious conflicts.

democratization
A process of transition as a country attempts to move from an authoritarian form of government to a democratic one.
The political and economic instability that typically accompanies transitions to democracy also makes new democratic governments vulnerable to attack by their opponents. The military will often revolt and take over the government on the grounds that progress cannot occur until order is restored. The open political conflict that emerges in a new democracy may not be easily harnessed into a well-functioning government that tolerates opposition. Despite such difficulties, strong forces are pushing authoritarian governments toward democratization. Nations find it difficult to succeed economically in today’s world without establishing a market economy, and market economies (that is, capitalism) give people substantial freedoms. Thus, authoritarian rulers may see economic reforms as a threat to their regime.

American Democracy: More Pluralist Than Majoritarian

It is not idle speculation to ask what kind of democracy is practiced in the United States. The answer to this question can help us understand why our government can be called democratic despite a low level of citizen participation in politics and despite government actions that run contrary to public opinion.

Throughout this book, we probe to determine how well the United States fits the two alternative models of democracy: majoritarian and pluralist. If our answer is not already apparent, it soon will be. We argue that the political system in the United States rates relatively low according to the majoritarian model of democracy but fulfills the pluralist model very well. Yet the pluralist model is far from a perfect representation of democracy. Its principal drawback is that it favors the well organized, and the poor are the least likely to be members of interest groups. As one advocate of majoritarian democracy once wrote, “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.”

This evaluation of the pluralist nature of American democracy may not mean much to you now. But you will learn that the pluralist model makes the United States look far more democratic than the majoritarian model would. Eventually, you will have to decide the answers to three questions: Is the pluralist model truly an adequate expression of democracy, or is it a perversion of classical ideals designed to portray America as democratic when it is not? Does the majoritarian model result in a “better” type of democracy? If so, could new mechanisms of government be devised
to produce a desirable mix of majority rule and minority rights? These questions should play in the back of your mind as you read about the workings of American government in meeting the challenge of democracy.

Tying It Together

1. How is the American government affected by increasing globalization?
   - National sovereignty: each national government has the right to govern its people as it wishes, without interference from other nations.
   - As globalization increases, human rights weigh more heavily in international politics.
     - Some believe that nations should be held accountable to international law.
     - The U.S. government worries that international law would require us to abide by laws based on other nations’ values rather than our own.
   - The American government must recognize it is part of a worldwide economic, social, and political network. Foreign affairs must be evaluated by how they affect the U.S. government and, conversely, how American politics affects governments in other nations.

2. How does government serve its citizens?
   - Maintaining order: the rule of law is established to preserve life and to protect property.
     - Communism is the theory that gives ownership of all land and productive facilities to the government.
   - Providing public goods: benefits and services are available to everyone, such as education, sanitation, and parks.
   - Promoting equality: the government’s role in redistributing income is a relatively new purpose of government and is highly controversial.

3. What are the critical values, conflicts, and political ideologies that affect the decisions and policies made by the American government?
   - Concepts that identify the values pursued by government:
     - Freedom: freedom of is the freedom to do something such as practice the religion you choose and freedom of speech.